EDGE

THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT

HOW SONY IS DEFINING THE NEW STATE OF THE ART IN MOBILE GAMING

BEHIND PS VITA

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DEAD RISING 2: OFF THE RECORD
RIDGE RACER UNBOUNDED

REVIEWED
DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION
DRIVER SAN FRANCISCO
XENOBLADE CHRONICLES
YAKUZA: OF THE END
STAR FOX 64 3D

PlayStation Vita (shown here actual size) arrives in Japan in late 2011. On p74 we put the hardware to the test, and talk to the men charged with making it succeed in the world's most competitive market

ANGRY BIRDS
THE SUCCESS STORY EXPLAINED

£FIVE
#232
OCTOBER 2011



The drive for innovation that lies beyond the screen



When Sony debuted its first handheld videogame console, discussion centred on one feature: its showstopping screen. The PSP hardware was the focal point of Sony's presence at E3 2004, and few who picked it up – or even saw it running from across the expo floor, thanks to the brightness of its display – left the event thinking that it would be anything other than another phenomenal success for the PlayStation brand that had laid waste to competitors since its foundation in 1994. Except Nintendo wasn't ready to relinquish its grip on the handheld market, which had only tightened since 1989, and its DS went on to sideline Sony's offering. Not for the first time, the less technically advanced solution triumphed because mass-scale popularity doesn't depend on raw specifications.

The reality is that raw specifications are only guaranteed to win the attention of the early-adopter market. And, as fully paid-up early adopters (with a stack of shameful receipts to prove it), we were – are – PSP fans. How could you not like a platform that's delivered games like *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*, *Lumines* and *Monster Hunter Freedom Unite*? And yet there's always been a sense that PSP has been Sony's under-achiever, the platform with the potential that was never quite followed through.

Its successor, PlayStation Vita (let's conveniently ignore PSP Go, for the sake of everyone involved), has core processing power worth shouting about, but it is a more rounded, considered proposition. Its development didn't take place in isolation, with a view that the PlayStation badge and some zingy graphical fidelity would see it through, but with a broader perspective. With two touch-sensitive interfaces, dual analogue sticks, crossplatform compatibility, two cameras, motion sensitivity and 3G/Wi-Fi functionality, it has what looks like the dream feature-set for someone in the market for a self-contained gaming system. Will that sell it to the *Angry Birds* crowd? Well, Vita may be lots of things, but it certainly isn't a mobile phone. For now, we'll focus on what it *is*, beginning on p74. ■

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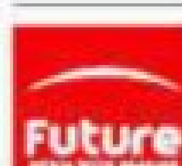
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VLEDGE

Nintendo's 3DS (1) is still a relative newcomer to the handheld world, but it's already suffered a price cut. What went wrong? We investigate on p10. While the future of 3DS is in limbo, on p14 we meet the studio behind indie smash *Limbo* (2), Copenhagen-based PlayDead, to find out more about its development philosophy as its debut arrives on PC and PS3. Closer to **Edge** HQ, on p16 we attend London's Digital Out-of-Home Interactive Entertainment conference (3) to find out how the arcade industry plans to fight back against its continued decline. Then, on p18, we investigate *Half-Life 2* mod *The Stanley Parable* (4) and discover something about the nature of choice in videogames, and whether the best thing we can do is choose not to play. While not playing, why not read a book? LA-based game culture outfit iam8bit (5) is releasing a showcase of its past three game-art shows in printed form, and on p20 we get a look at some of the work that features in its dazzling new exhibition. Less familiar within these pages is world-record-holding sprinter Usain Bolt (6), who features in Soundbytes (p22) revealing his predilection for a bit of PS3 time when he's winding down. And from a man who runs to a man who runs a country, culture secretary Ed Vaizey (7) gives evidence before the My Favourite Game Committee (p24) on why he should be allowed to play games in his office.



bit.ly/lM3xla
Up-to-the-minute game news and views

Nintendo's rescue mission

Disappointing sales, falling stock and angry investors: will the 3DS price cut be enough?

Nintendo's announcement that it would be cutting the price of its 3DS hardware worldwide followed a fiscal quarter in which sales had fallen by a half, losses had grown to over £200 million, and just 710,000 units had been sold worldwide. Coming just months after launch, the scale of the cut – 40 per cent in Japan, a third in the US and Europe – means Nintendo is to sell its hardware at a loss. Its share price fell to a six-year low and investors suggested it move, or buy, into the smartphone market. Company president **Satoru Iwata** accepted responsibility and took a 50 per cent pay cut, wrote to "betrayed" early adopters and offered them 20 free games by way of apology, then asked investors to give him four months to turn it around. Nintendo has reacted swiftly, and dramatically.

Company president Iwata asked investors to give him four months to turn the situation around

In truth, this is neither the first loss-making Nintendo hardware (the launch model DS was, too) or early price cut: in the UK the price of the N64 console was reduced two months after launch while its GameCube successor's RRP was trimmed before it was even released, though both reductions were in response to competitors' similar moves. That £200m loss, too, needs to be put in the context of the strength of the yen, and the fact that last year's 3DS R&D costs were replaced this year by Wii U launch preparations.

But Nintendo, and its investors, expected more from 3DS. It is premature to declare the device a failure, but it has failed to meet the company's expectations. To an extent, the only way was down from its dominance with Wii and DS, but Nintendo has contributed to its own problems in several ways.

First, the system was a difficult marketing proposition to begin with. That striking glasses-free 3D effect could not be shown off in print, online or on TV: the only thing that could sell the system was 3DS itself. A second issue involved timing. Announced in March 2010, riding a wave of 3D hype fuelled by the release of James Cameron's Avatar four months earlier, by the time 3DS was released the public was tiring of Hollywood's 3D obsession (just ask TV makers frustrated in their attempt to sell 3D to a market still in transition to HD).

A third point concerns the evolution of the mobile gaming market. When Nintendo launched its DS in 2004, touch control using a stylus was a revelation. Seven years later, we need neither a stylus nor a dedicated handheld for that, and devices are used for much more than just games. The rapid growth of mobile and social gaming suggests that a good proportion of the expanded market Nintendo helped to create has been distracted by smartphones, and its expectations of game price and content has changed drastically in seven years.

In January, Europe's press attended a 3DS launch event in Amsterdam and left with a release date, but no price or launch line-up. When the latter was eventually confirmed almost three weeks later it was missing the customary firstparty system-seller. One store manager at a major UK retailer tells us: "There was good interest at first, but a lot of people who placed deposits got refunds once they saw the launch titles."

Perhaps this was a show of support to thirdparties that have long accepted that releasing games for Nintendo systems means playing second fiddle to the platform holder itself, but it backfired. Capcom shipped a million copies of launch title *Super Street Fighter IV 3D Edition*, but didn't sell them; Nintendo proudly proclaimed *Ocarina Of Time 3D* to be the system's first million-seller the day after it announced the drop in price.

Then, some of the system's key features – the eShop download store, the automatic downloads of 3D videos over SpotPass – were unavailable to buyers at launch. **David Yarnton**, general manager of Nintendo UK, admits: "It's



The 'flame red' 3DS launched alongside *Star Fox 64 3D* in Japan, and unit sales doubled. US release is September 9, with an EU rollout to follow



bit.ly/nXVOOO
More from Iwata's letter to 3DS owners

WHO'S BUYING?
Extracts from a letter in the name of Satoru Iwata (pictured) from Nintendo's Japanese Web site after the announcement: "Never before has Nintendo chosen to issue such a dramatic price drop less than six months after a system release. Those of you who supported us by purchasing the 3DS in the beginning may feel betrayed. There is nothing we can do to completely make up for the feeling you are being punished for buying the system early. We feel a strong responsibility to develop the 3DS as a platform – to ensure that, in the end, everyone is satisfied. We will make every effort to do so."



David Yarnton, general manager, Nintendo UK

not so good for us to talk about things if we can't actually provide them. With hardware, we've always looked to add extra [features] so consumers aren't just buying something and that's it. We would have liked to have had some of it there a bit earlier."

Negative tabloid coverage put Nintendo on the back foot within days of its UK launch. Claims that retailers were seeing record return levels of the console, after users experienced nausea and dizziness, went uncorrected even when said retailers denied them. "We didn't have any systems returned due to sickness, but customers did mention the negative press in store," our retail source says. "The most concerned were parents looking to buy for young children, and many opted not to."

Nintendo had already made clear that the 3D effect was unsuitable for children aged six and under, and that 3DS games would never *only* be playable in 3D. But the first ten minutes with a 3DS can be disorienting – no great help when you rely on in-store demo pods, and subsequent word of mouth, to fuel demand.

"A big thing we're really conscious of is looking after the people that have bought into our formats"

Then there is the Nintendo company line regarding the threat of mobile and social games. At the Game Developers Conference in February, Iwata opened his keynote saying "content is king" and went on to attack those who he believed had "no motivation to maintain the high value of videogame software". By value, he meant price. As president of both a publisher and platform holder he was obliged to make the claim, but his words rang rather hollow when Nintendo went on to release, in *Nintendogs + Cats*, *Pilotwings Resort* and later *Steel Diver*, arguably the most lightweight firstparty line-up in its history. What first seemed like confidence soon felt like denial.

The facts speak for themselves. The system has failed to sell to expectations, prompting Nintendo to slash the price worldwide and watch as its share value tumbles for the second time in three months. Meanwhile, a developer of Facebook games floats on the stock market valued at $20 billion. A Finnish game studio turns a 59p app into a multinational, crossmedia brand in the space of a year. Apple, the company which despite Nintendo's insistence to the contrary appears to have taken much of the expanded market it created, sits on more cash than the US government.

Yet the facts do not tell the whole story. With an affordable price, two Mario games due before the end of the year, and a clear run at Christmas now Sony has confirmed Vita won't be on western shelves until 2012, 3DS has every chance of recovery. Yarnton says thirdparties have warmly received the price cut. "I've had a lot of publishers saying this is fantastic, because it'll help unit sales, and we have got some good software coming," he explains. "For retail it's the same situation: it's tough out there, and they see this as a real positive to help their business."

Our retail source concurs, but says much about the need for Nintendo to first gather, then sustain, momentum for the console before Vita is released: "I believe the price drop will cause sales to pick up, but until killer software comes out we won't see anything like the sales we hoped for. I can't see it losing its shelf space, though, because there is nothing else to put in its place."

Japan's weekly reporting of sales figures means it is the first territory in which the impact of the price cut can be assessed. Predictably, in the week following the announcement but before it came into force, sales of 3DS hardware halved. However, smaller specialist stores immediately slashed the price of their second-hand stock, and sales doubled as gamers with an eye for a bargain saw an opportunity for both the cheaper hardware and the 20 games included in the Ambassador Programme.

Iwata asked investors to give him four months, but that will only sketch out the extent of 3DS's, and Nintendo's, recovery. A fuller picture will emerge with financial results in late January and become even clearer following Vita's western launch in, we assume, spring. Should Sony's new console similarly struggle, while the mobile and social sectors continue their rapid growth, the writing may be on the wall for the dedicated gaming handheld.

Nintendo knows that its loyal customers will always pay a premium for its firstparty products. It knows now how important they are, as evidenced in concessions to disenchanted core gamers with Wii U and in the generous Ambassador Programme offered to early adopters, and like Iwata, Yarnton is keen to express his gratitude. "One of the big things we're really conscious of is looking after the people that have bought into our formats," he says. "We respect them and value them a lot. We don't want to forget the people that have already been there and are loyal. They're very important to us." ■

AMBASSADOR'S RECEPTION

As we went to press, Nintendo had yet to fully specify the contents and release schedule for its Ambassador Programme, aimed at placating early 3DS adopters. Of the ten NES games, which will be given away from September 1, five have been announced: *Super Mario Bros*, *Donkey Kong Jr*, *Balloon Fight*, *Ice Climber* and *The Legend Of Zelda*. Five GBA games – *Yoshi's Island*, *Mario Kart: Super Circuit*, *Metroid Fusion*, *WarioWare Inc* and *Mario Vs Donkey Kong* – are confirmed, with independent sources reporting that *Super Mario Advance 4* and *Kirby & The Amazing Mirror* are lined up too.







Among the games in the Ambassador Programme are (from top) *Mario Vs Donkey Kong*, *Metroid Fusion* and, apparently, *Super Mario Advance 4*



MARIO KART 7

Nintendo almost certainly has great expectations for *Mario Kart 7*, since the series' DS and Wii instalments both clung to the best-seller charts for years. The latest model tampers with the ageing basics somewhat, adding glider wings, underwater courses and kart customisation, with the size of your kart's wheels having a large effect on handling. If 3DS has a safe bet in its line-up, this must surely be it.

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** In-house/Retro **Release** Dec 4



SUPER MARIO 3D LAND

The name recalls Gunpei Yokoi's Game Boy efforts, while the Tanooki tail hints at a return to the creative peaks of *Super Mario Bros 3*, but in reality this is something altogether new. With the team behind *Mario Galaxy* brought down to earth and locked into a series of bite-sized 3D environments, each one tailored for the length of a bus ride, *3D Land* promises concentrated bursts of pure platforming invention.

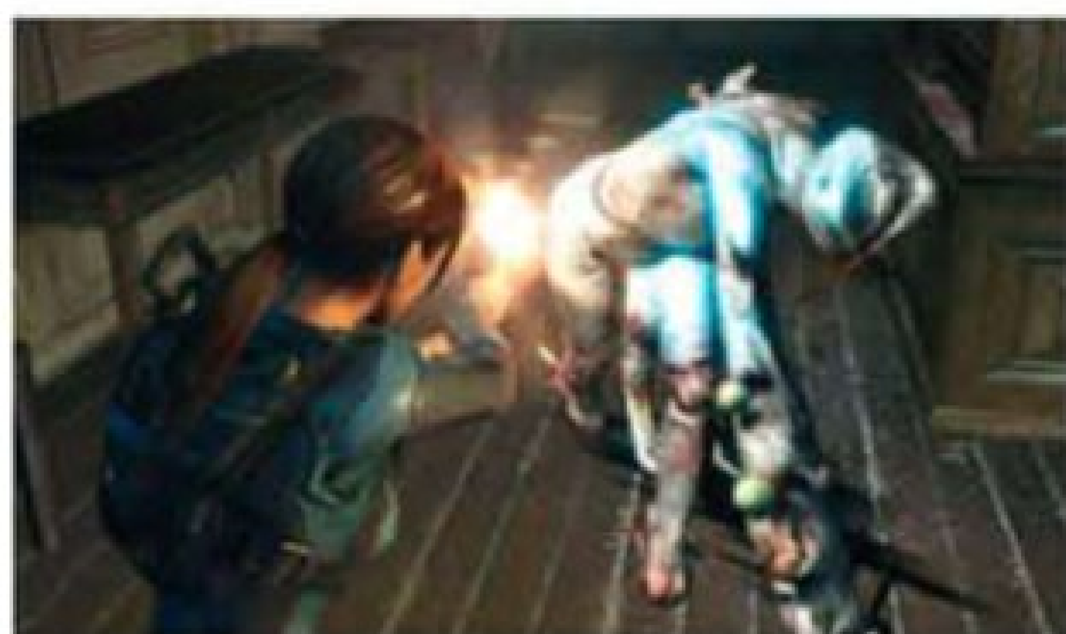
Publisher Nintendo **Developer** In-house **Release** November



KID ICARUS: UPRISING

The crowds cheered when one of Nintendo's mustiest mascots was finally granted a long-awaited return – but those cheers were notably absent when players got to try the game out. With Circle Pad character movement, stylus aiming, and shooting farmed out to a shoulder button, Pit's got some serious control issues to deal with if he's ever going to reclaim a seat among *Super Mario Bros* and *The Legend Of Zelda*.

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Project Sora **Release** Q1 2012



RESIDENT EVIL: REVELATIONS

Revelations' beleaguered cruise ship looks genuinely eerie looming out of the ocean mist in brilliant 3D, but a new setting and prettier environmental modelling aren't the only things the latest *Resident Evil* has going for it. After the hectic action of *Mercenaries*, this is a return to true survival horror, with series favourite Jill Valentine at the centre of another pleasingly overwrought potboiler.

Publisher Capcom **Developer** In-house **Release** 2012



PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE MASK OF MIRACLE

Layton promises a switch to 3D character models and environments as the action moves to Montdol, a town harbouring a mask with the power to grant wishes. It's a shame to lose all that hand-drawn art, but it will be interesting to see how Level-5's puzzle designers tackle stereoscopic depth, especially since developers are forbidden from making it critical to the gameplay.

Publisher Level-5 **Developer** In-house **Release** February (Japan)



LUIGI'S MANSION 2

On the previous occasion Luigi took a starring role, GameCube was upon us and Nintendo settled in for five years of critical praise and commercial annihilation. Now he's back among the ghosts – in the hands of *Punch Out!!* custodian Next Level Games, but with Miyamoto supervising development – and we're promised new environments, slicker vacuum-cleaner handling and gyroscope controls.

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Next Level Games **Release** 2012



DQ ROCKET SLIME 3D: THE GREAT PIRATE SHIP AND TAILS TROUPE

It's unlikely to have the same kind of sales impact as a proper *Dragon Quest* RPG, but this blend of combat-heavy exploring and strategic tank-battling may drag a disaffected Japanese audience away from *Monster Hunter* just long enough for Nintendo's new handheld to get a proper foothold.

Publisher Square Enix **Developer** In-house **Release** TBC



MARIO & SONIC AT THE LONDON 2012 OLYMPIC GAMES

They may be minigame compilations, but Mario and Sonic's previous Olympic team-ups are some of the best-selling titles on DS. Nintendo will be looking to *London* to mobilise audiences reluctant to make the hardware transition. For everyone else, it's another selection of breezy assault courses. Now with Big Ben.

Publisher Sega **Developer** In-house **Release** November



POKÉMON RUMBLE BLAST

A proper *Pokémon* game could bring new life to 3DS, but this will have to do until then. A basic brawler in which you guide a toy Pokémon through hundreds of enemies, taking on occasional bosses, the collection element that has defined the series returns, but the complex web of systems that makes the RPGs so keenly addictive is all but absent.

Publisher Nintendo **Developer** Ambrella **Release** October

PlayDead rising

With Limbo's arrival on PC, the co-founders of an indie success story take a moment to reflect

When PlayDead's *Limbo* debuted as part of Xbox Live's Summer of Arcade in 2010, its austere black-and-white visuals and minimalist sound design made it the least 'summery' title in the promotion's history. But no amount of seasonal discordance could hamper its appeal. Generating nearly $8 million in the year of its release, *Limbo* proved that, with an inspired concept and decent visibility, an independent, arty game could achieve major success. Initially released exclusively on Xbox 360, *Limbo* has since been ported to PSN and PC. We catch up with studio co-founders **Dino Patti** (CEO) and **Arnt Jensen** (game director) at PlayDead's Copenhagen offices on the day of *Limbo*'s Steam release to reflect on their approach to making and selling games.

You built your own game engine for *Limbo* but have decided to use Unity for your new, unannounced game. What prompted that decision?

Arnt Jensen It was just too much work. It's like having a double product, doing both engine and game. And our next project is a little bit more ambitious than *Limbo* so there are a lot of things we don't want to make from the beginning.

Dino Patti *Limbo*'s engine only works when it's black-and-white now. It can't render colour any more.

AJ It's so hacked you can't believe it. We're so incredibly lucky that it held together. It could've exploded!

Do you anticipate a lengthy production cycle for the new project?

AJ It's supposed to be hard, it's not supposed to be easy, and I really get suspicious if it's too easy. It's got to be like a birth every time.

DP If you just go with the flow, you're not creating something new. We have to take the hard decisions. A good game takes time. I think the new production will take at least three-and-a-half years.

AJ You know, it's done when it's done. You have to be proud of it to close it. With *Limbo* you could feel when we had something, and people were getting really proud – there were a lot of friends coming and testing. And then as you get closer to the end, you can feel like 'now we're almost there'. So it's hard to just make this big deadline out somewhere, because if you're not there yet, it's just… you have to wait to have this nice feeling.

> "If you just go with the flow, you're not creating something new. We have to take the hard decisions"

How do you strike a balance between getting things right and heeding pressure from investors to get the game to market or meet milestones?

DP We're trying to get rid of our investors because of this.

AJ We found these guys we hadn't tried before. We were low on money – we had zero funds. But the cool thing about PlayDead is that everybody here is creative. I don't think anyone here wants to just work and work and never get anything done, so everyone has a lust to get it done and get something complete.

When you most needed funds, did you ever consider selling the *Limbo* IP?

DP At the beginning, Arnt had just made the trailer and we started working together. Publishers weren't coming with specific offers, but they were trying to find out if this was something that was saleable, or what price they could offer for the *Limbo* IP, and would Arnt sell? And they found out quickly the answer was 'no'. Arnt put his foot down – nothing could be sold that way. So it was not like specific offers in the beginning. There has been a lot of interest around the IP, but it was not there for discussion.

AJ We've been talking about this: if we should sell the company or IP, what would we do with the money? We'd probably start a small independent company just to do what we want to do, but that's what we're already doing, so why? Why sell this? It's kind of ridiculous, really.





Game director Arnt Jensen (top) and Dino Patti, CEO of PlayDead



Could PlayDead ever be based anywhere other than Denmark?

DP Oh, yes. We actually looked into moving to the States where there actually is a games industry and it has that infrastructure for games. Here we don't have anything like that and everything is going so slow – the government support or just the acceptance of games as part of the culture… it's just really difficult. There's about 500 people in the games industry in Denmark, and 200 of those are at [*Hitman* studio] IO. Everybody in the company was actually super hyped about the Bay Area, especially after going out to the Game Developers Conference and visiting Double Fine's studio [see p138].

Why didn't the relocation work out?

DP It's kind of difficult to move the whole company to the States. It was something we looked at after finishing *Limbo*. It seemed like we could do it in a smooth transition, but setting up new offices became a not very smooth process. ■





Even Jensen's early concept sketches (above) reveal a minimalist, monochrome vision for *Limbo*. The PlayDead team (below) in their Copenhagen base



Jensen initially planned to develop *Limbo* himself as a free PC game, but Patti sensed the game's commercial potential



HALF-LOVE

PlayDead's co-founders on their favourite developer



"I remember the first time I played *Half-Life*," recalls Jensen. "It was just: 'OK, this is totally different, it's such a new approach to the industry'. I don't have to know how Valve does it right, because I know they're doing it right. I can feel and know how it is to make a game like that, and how difficult it must have been, and how they've been struggling. So I can feel everything – the integrity and the heart they put into it. It's so inspiring to us."

"It's not just about the FPS," Patti adds, "it's the way they do it and the way they think. Valve have these values that everyone admires, but nobody really understands how they get to them."





The animation of *Limbo*'s menacing spider enemy (above) adds to the nightmarish unease. Jensen's father had a craftsman in his local village create this replica of *Limbo*'s boy (right)

Searching for the future of the arcade

Britain's newest entertainment conference looks for answers to coin-op's mortal questions

The timing was prescient. In the same week that UK Trade and Industry launched the inaugural Digital Out-of-Home Interactive Entertainment conference, Britain's most influential game arcade, Funland at London's Trocadero, closed its doors. It's difficult to imagine clearer evidence of the ongoing decline of the videogame arcade than the closure of one of the amusement industry's last bastions, a venue that has kept the arcade faithful out of credits through thick and thin.

If Funland's closure was the symptom, then the DOE conference was all about finding the cure or, if that's too late, at least a way forward for videogames in the public sphere. Nevertheless, the tone of the conference keynote, delivered by **Randy White**, CEO of White Hutchinson Leisure & Learning Group, was defiant in the face of apparent defeat, pointing to the boom in social Web games as evidence of the arcade's continuing relevance: "People play *CityVille* and *Empires & Allies* on Facebook not so much for the game itself, but for the social aspect. Not much has changed since we were cave people in terms of desire to play together. It's still about being a group, an area where out-of-home entertainment can strongly deliver."

> "Not much has changed since we were cave people in terms of playing together. It's about being a group"

However, White was quick to concede that the arcade cannot but struggle in this new day, where the "creative destruction of location" has ensured that "our entertainment is no longer place-dependent," but can instead be consumed in the home or even as we commute. "We work in an industry where we try to bring people to a location to be entertained," he said. "But how on earth do we get people to stop looking at their personal screens long enough to visit?"

White pointed to statistics drawn from various studies to show that games have enjoyed the most growth in terms of the portion of our leisure time they consume. In the US, the amount of time we are playing games increased by 28 per cent in 15+-year-olds over the past five years. As of December 2010, in the UK, of the 948 minutes the average adult spends awake, 45 per cent of that time is spent in media and online communication, with the greatest percentage given over to video, including games, he revealed.

This redoubled interest in videogames has not translated to the out-of-home entertainment sector, however. While homes in the lowest 20 per cent of household income have increased videogame spending by 214 per cent, this has coincided with a shift to consoles and other, more general in-home purchasing of electronic goods.

Last year the average American household spent just $180 over the course of the year on out-of-home entertainment, including museums, theme parks and cinemas, as well as amusement arcades (excluding food and retail spending), a demonstration that per capita participation is reducing.

While there has been an undeniable trend away from families spending time on out-of-home entertainment experiences, White argued that arcade games have also fallen prey to the "fidelity belly". He argued that over the past few years there has been a polarising of our leisure time pursuits around either high-fidelity experiences, such as rock concerts and theme parks, or low-fidelity entertainment experiences, such as iPads and consoles that require little investment of time and effort to enjoy. "The fidelity belly is where everything that is between these two extremes dies," he said. "We have seen it happen to CDs and we are now seeing it happen to videogame arcades".

White wasn't the bearer of only miserable tidings, however. He also sought to offer a way forward, out of the industry's current situation. "What is the antidote to the fidelity belly?" he asked. "Socialising. We need to view arcade games as primarily about socialising, not entertainment." He pointed to the movie industry for examples of where this shift is occurring in other out-of-home entertainment sectors. "Cinemas are trying to respond with in-theatre dining, bars, restaurants. They are clearly going upscale in order to strengthen the social aspect of going to the movies."

He urged game makers to look at

The powerful social aspect of the arcade is fundamental to its future, says industry expert Randy White

some classic, non-digital social game classics for inspiration: "Miniature golf, bowling and billiards are all classic social games that have stood the test of time when it comes to out-of-home entertainment. They all share common characteristics in that they have a group of people playing. One person does something, usually with a ball, while others watch the entertainment and socialise. It's an extremely powerful formula, and there are lessons in these classic games that we would do well to learn from at this moment in time."

White also encouraged game makers to build transformation into their experiences. "If you can integrate personal recognition, self-esteem and transformation from one state to another into your games then it raises their perceived value," he argued. "Customer co-creation is another model that is key to raising the sense of value to out-of-home entertainment experiences," he said, referencing Starbucks' 'Have It Your Way' coffee programme as an example of a company that's working together with its customers to give a tailored, unique experience.

"The key is to offer unique experiences that are difficult or impossible to replicate at home," he concluded. "We have learned to steal ideas from the theme park, crafting big experiences to draw visitors in and inspire repeat visitation. Now we need to couple that with experience personalisation, integration with other devices and social media." ■



Randy White, CEO, White Hutchinson Leisure & Learning

Digging up the critical path

In Half-Life 2 mod The Stanley Parable, your first choice may simply be choosing to choose not to play

This is the story of a man named Stanley. Stanley worked for a company in a big building, where he was employee 427. Employee 427's job was simple – he sat at his desk in room 427, and he pushed buttons. Orders came up on a monitor next to his desk, telling him which buttons to push, how long to push them for, and in what order. This is what he did every day, and although others may have considered it soul-rending, Stanley relished every moment that the orders came in.

The Stanley Parable, a *Half-Life 2* mod by **Davey Wrenden**, is many things. Clever, definitely. Worth playing? No question. Rough and unpolished? Without a doubt. But subtle? No.

It is, however, one of the most interesting pieces of metagaming commentary of late. The focus isn't really on poor Stanley, but on two key themes – our willingness to follow orders or rebel against authority, and exactly what having the power to choose means in the context of a completely designed world.

The focus is on our willingness to follow orders or rebel, and what having the power to choose means

Mostly, these decisions take the form of picking between two open doors, with the narrator ordering you to go left so that his story can continue, while you're tempted by the power of the unknown. The genius of it is that doing so radically shifts the nature of the world itself, along with the relationship between Stanley and his narrator. Is the narrator on his side? Is he a vengeful GLaDOS-style god? Is the whole situation an illusion, a conspiracy, a trial, a gift? Yes. Or no. Maybe both.

Specifics would spoil the game if you haven't tried it yet (if you can't run the mod, there's always YouTube), although it's interesting to note that in the author's experience "almost everyone on their first playthrough takes the left door", before later rebelling. Also, "the second most popular choice is to disobey all the way to the end".

So why don't commercial games take on this kind of metatextual premise?

A few do, though mostly via narrative elements alone. *Knights Of The Old Republic 2*'s story, for instance, was largely a critique of the concept of predestination via the Force in Star Wars, while *Shadow Of The Colossus*' final twist made players re-examine just how readily games have trained them to commit murder at request. Very rarely are specific in-game mechanics or the player's own role directly brought under the spotlight except in outright parody games, which typically stick to poking fun at a problem they've found instead of actually fixing it.

There are more ambitious games, though, from *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s very pointed take on hero worship and its own fanbase, to *BioShock*'s more popular explanation of its critical path being a result of mind control from its villain. Even here, though, with players responding well to the plot point, there was enough of the game left for the problems to sink in – notably that this restriction was more down to the level design than the villain's orders, and that nothing actually changed post-revelation. An initial wowed response of: "Yes! I *have* been following orders like a robot!" can very quickly give way to: "Wait, it's my fault you designed a linear shooter?"

So, just what does make for a good metagame? In most cases, short is a good start. Something intended to last five minutes has much less risk of both tripping over its toes and angering the player – unintentionally, at least – when they realise they're the butt of the joke.

For a great example of the style done well, look for Adam Cadre's text adventure *9:05*, a game about waking up in a panic. For something meatier, try Andrew Plotkin's *Spider And Web*, an espionage-themed experiment revolving around the relationship between you-as-player, you-as-character and a narrator who expects you to be one and the same. Other thought-provoking free games worth checking out include *Loved*, *One Chance* and *Sweatshop*.

In most cases, however, you wouldn't want to play a game to be insulted, and that's a common problem. Far too often, games with an eye on being meta forget that we're not really fooled by painted-on doors, AI that jumps straight from "Ho, friend!" to "We must fight to the death!" or big fake choices. We merely tolerate them, ignore them and in most cases forgive them – and any game that wants to rub our faces in that generosity had better be damn sure it has every last brick of its own house in order first.

This is not a problem with *The Stanley Parable*, however. You might find it pretentious, or clever, or simply funny – and at various points, it's all of them at once. The key is that while the narrator himself can be preachy, the game as a whole isn't. There are no real right or wrong choices, simply different ones, up to and including walking away. Whatever you take from it, though, it'll almost certainly include a smile. ■





bit.ly/o4eP7x
The Stanley Parable at Mod DB

If this seems familiar in some way, the whole mod looks like this. Empty rooms and corridors, all built with basic *Half-Life 2* assets





The Stanley Parable author Davey Wrenden is currently in the process of creating a new version of our hero (left)

CHOOSE OR PERISH

The scrutiny applied to modern-day gaming decisions

With even more singleplayer games now effectively online, if only via Achievements, the choices we make in-game have never been more open. Everyone can see, for instance, that in the PC version of *Fallout: New Vegas*, 18.7 per cent of people decided to take over the city, while only 6.7 per cent threw in with the villains. Bravo. This is slowly making its way into games directly too, with *LA Noire* offering an effective 'ask the audience' option during interrogations, and the Japanese puzzler *Catherine* presenting stats on how many of its players voted for marriage.

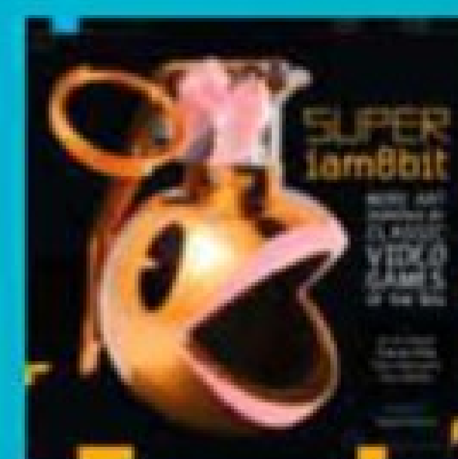
I AM 8 (AGAIN)

LA's hip game culture collective powers up

For the opening of its fifth annual exhibition of fine art inspired by '80s videogame culture, LA-based iam8bit Productions changed the name of the event from iam8bit to Super iam8bit. For anyone reared on 8bit games, the preamble 'super' conjures images of teeny 2D Mario sprouting into his stouter form, and the Nintendo mascot's mutation offers a perfect analogue for iam8bit's growth, all the way down to the hipster moustache.

Thanks to the credibility banked by its arch-hip gallery show, iam8bit has morphed itself into a full-scale boutique marketing firm, events producer and creative consultancy. Clients range from Nintendo Of America to MTV to Radiohead. It's also moved into a vastly bigger gallery space – nearly 5,000 square feet – in LA's trendy Echo Park neighbourhood.

"It's our playground and constant experiment," says iam8bit founder **Jon M Gibson** of the new HQ. "We want to do everything there – from art shows to concerts to skateboarding. We designed the space to adapt and evolve. It's very modular that way, and videogames are just the tip of the pixelated iceberg." ■



This year's exhibition, featuring Barnaby Ward's dizzying *Metroid*-inspired work (pictured), runs until September 10. A book (above) is also imminent

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"It's not like those things are pieces of shit, you know? They're fun – some of them are fun. So I think they're a necessity.

Not everyone has to be living on the edge like I am.

I think that would be a problem too, if that was the case."

Ex-Team Ninja chief **Tomonobu Itagaki** offers his take on the games at E3 2011



"It doesn't mean you have to socialise with people. It doesn't mean you have to do anything but play the game by yourself."

A million basement-dwellers applaud as Blizzard's **Robert Bridenbecker** clarifies *Diablo III*'s online demands



"I don't get a credit and you'll **never see me acting again."**

Activision's **Bobby Kotick** on his role in new Brad Pitt film Moneyball



"It makes me relaxed. When I'm stressed, I just play games."

World's fastest man **Usain Bolt** pays tribute to his beloved PlayStation 3

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Fruit Ninja FX
Manufacturer Adrenaline Amusement

Fruit Ninja's arrival in the arcade is a glimpse of the future. Half Brick's mega-selling mobile title, in which you dice flying fruit with sweeps of your finger for points and combos, has already made its way to larger screens via Kinect, and with Adrenaline Amusement licensing both this and Firemint's *Flight Control* for the arcade, it could well portend an ongoing handheld-to-coin-op migration.

You might wonder at the strategy: who's going want to pay per play, when you can slash fruit indefinitely on your phone for 70p? Adrenaline's answer is to make it a social experience with a three-screen cluster (although single-screen plinths are available) and competitive play. The screen itself makes it an attractive proposition, with a responsive 46-inch multitouch which does justice to the game's sharp, saturated colours, and allows the player to slice fruit with every finger simultaneously.

The host platform, TouchFX, will no doubt serve as the basis for Adrenaline Amusement's release of *Flight Control*, too, as the arcade fills up with ever more finger-flailing fare.



My favourite game Ed Vaizey

The UK's minister for culture contemplates a gaming room in the mother of parliaments

Ed Vaizey is the UK's minister for culture, communications and creative industries, a remit that just happens to cover some of the world's best game developers. Vaizey has been instrumental in raising the profile of games behind the high walls of the Houses of Parliament but, it turns out, he's equally happy playing *Plants Vs Zombies* on the Tube.

When did you first start gaming?
Well, I wouldn't describe myself as a gamer, and I was never very good at games. Obviously, being aged 43, my gaming trajectory probably followed that of people very similar to my age, which is a bit of *Asteroids* to start with, and then moving on to *Space Invaders*. The memory probably plays tricks, but I think it was probably around when I was ten or 11. And then the most sophisticated it got for me was probably *Defender*. But I think the trouble with playing games at that age, when you're 13 or 14, is if you're not very good but your mates are, it tends to put you off! So games never really embedded in my consciousness.

But now I'm starting to play games again. Partly, obviously, because I'm the games minister, but actually it's become something I do with my son, who's not yet five. It's a very good example of why on one hand games have this image of solitary people who are antisocial, whereas my son and I started off with *Angry Birds* and now we've moved on to *Plants Vs Zombies*. It's a game that I'm really quite enjoying – to the extent that I now surreptitiously play it by myself when my wife's gone to bed! I've also got myself a Wii, and I play *Mario Kart*.

GAMES CON
Born in 1968, Vaizey became Conservative MP for the Oxfordshire constituency of Wantage in 2005, and was re-elected in 2010. In addition to his ministerial duties, Vaizey is also a trained barrister and a regular newspaper columnist. ELSPA director general Michael Rawlinson described him as "one of the few politicians with a true grasp as to the importance of the videogames industry and its cultural impact".



Other than professionally, how do games factor into your day?
All of this stuff depends partly on your background, and partly on your lifestyle. I think the reason that social gaming and apps have taken off is that if I'm on the Tube, for example, I'm not going to be able to look at my emails or anything, but I can take out my iPhone and get to the next level of *Plants Vs Zombies*! So I think that being able to dip into games when you're travelling is the kind of thing that's going to make people like me play more.

Like I say, I wasn't culturally a gamer – it wasn't something that caught on with me in my teenage years because I wasn't very good at them. But now, middle-aged men with iPhones are more likely to play games because they're so easy to get.

"I think with a new generation of MPs you're going to see a significant shift towards the support of games"

Outside of game industry exponents such as yourself and Tom Watson, has there been a shift in attitude towards games among MPs?
Yeah, I think there's been a definite shift. TIGA and UKIE have been very good at raising the profile of games and getting across a different message to politicians about the applicability of games to a range of sectors – such as education – and the fact that game companies employ top-notch graduates with formidable backgrounds in computer science and art. And I certainly think with a new generation of MPs you're going to see a significant shift [towards] support of gaming in parliament.

Most people are aware of the Houses of Parliament's bars, but when are we likely to see a gaming room for MPs?
It's quite an interesting point you make there, because I asked if I could put a games console in my room in the department. The powers that be were against it, because people coming for meetings would assume that I was spending every spare minute playing games! Yet I'm allowed a TV… I should have been more firm. Perhaps I *will* be more firm and say I want a games console in my office to put on display and show the best of British gaming – I would happily do that! And I think that's a very good point: people don't think twice about the fact that every MP has a TV in their room. As for setting up a gaming room, why shouldn't we? Especially as I think we have a rifle range somewhere – although I've never found it… [laughs]

A lightgun range would be a lot safer.
Exactly! And if the industry wanted to start talks along those lines with the Commons Society, I would certainly support them.

OK, time to pick your favourite game.
Well, it's a complicated question. At the moment, it's definitely *Plants Vs Zombies*. But *Defender* is the one that sticks mostly in my mind, because that was the block to me becoming a gamer, as I wasn't very good at it. 'Favourite' isn't the right word to describe *Defender*, but 'most significant' probably is. ■

Vaizey was a speechwriter and adviser for former Conservative leader Michael Howard, and has been on the party's front bench since 2006

John Lawrence

WEB SITE

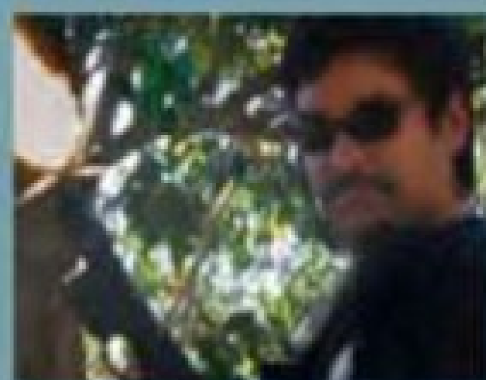
The Tip Of The Sphere
thetipofthesphere.com

Game designer Jaime Griesemer knows a thing or two about making games. His work at Bungie has been extensive, from early multiplayer work on *Myth II* to a role as game design lead on *Halo 3* and most recently his contribution to *Halo Reach*.

Though only launched at the beginning of the year, The Tip Of The Sphere is already bursting with his unique view of game design, how to get it right and how to get it wrong, the fundamentals of enemy design, plus a dissection of football penalty shootouts.

Griesemer's posts are short and succinct – as with the Master Chief himself, there's not a wasted word – and his examination of game industry vocabulary and codification is a valuable contribution to this burgeoning field of study.





VIDEO

Mega 64's Deus Ex tribute
bit.ly/odt1ja

It's branded a tribute but, as with all of Mega 64's output, you can't help read – and adore – it as parody. Shuttling the super-serious iconography and dialogue of *Deus Ex* into the modern world of a retail store provides some fine public confusion as a Denton wannabe hacks anything electrical (including fax machines). It's when the video pulls back to reveal itself as a fake trailer for *Deus Ex 3* – being shown at Comic-Con in front of what seem to be Eidos personnel – that you really begin to admire the nerve and gusto of the Mega 64 team.

WEB GAME

Lee-Lee's Quest
bit.ly/p69mej

Lee-Lee's Quest, like much of indie developer Marcus Richert's output, riffs on gaming classics with some dry wit and well-timed laughs. Set in a parody version of *Super Mario World*, Lee-Lee is on a mission to rescue Lou-Lou – the damsel in distress who, it's laid out from the start, is actually a man who "just happens to have long eyelashes and likes pink". The platforming is simple and smooth and the gags come thick and fast. While Richert's level designs are basic imitations of traditional layouts – though often cunning in their own right – it's the voice-acting and script that deserve the most praise. Rather than squish the foes littered around the place, you find yourself holding off for a quip or piece of dialogue. Lee-Lee and his quest are perfectly short and silly.



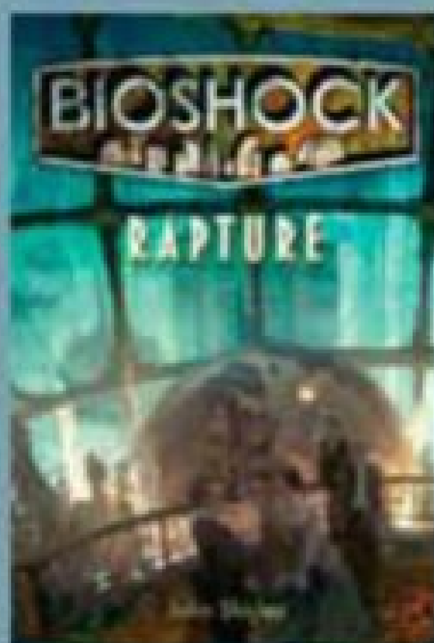
THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A sprinkling of things that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**232

BOOK

BioShock: Rapture (John Shirley, Titan Books)

Did you know that the patch of sea floor on which Rapture was built is located just south-west of Iceland? Or that the recordings of Ryan's voice that play on audiologs and over loudspeakers as you pass through Rapture were initially delivered as public addresses, but recorded so that edited sections could be later broadcast as "inspirational talks"? While author John Shirley's prose is competent, if not exactly artful, in execution, *BioShock* fans will find their appreciation of the game's setting elevated by digesting the background details this novelisation provides. Like an ocean flooding a crumbled ballroom, Shirley does his best to fill the gaps.



continue

Shifting
Roadworks suddenly feel a whole lot more annoying, right?

Slap bass
Driver's taught us that cops can't cruise through Cali without it.

Augmentations
Laser-enhanced eyes GET – but when can we apply for new lungs?

Blaming games
It's reassuring to have one predictable thing in the face of chaos.

quit

Faked screens
Prediction: pretend screenshots will never go out of fashion. *Ever.*

Taking screenshots
Sometimes it might be easier to draw you a picture of the game.

Expired betas
Connect up the console, find the game no longer works. Yay.

3DS accusations
First the Sun, now Private Eye claims it causes headaches.

TWEETS

Apologies to all my *Carcassonne* iOS opponents for neglecting my turns of late. I have been busy being acquired by EA. It is now your move.
@Greenspeak

Nintendo regarding iOS: we don't want to devalue games. Nintendo regarding poor 3DS sales: have 20 games free!
@BinaryTweedDeej

Shove that up your crunch, Pachter. I'm fucking off to the seaside BECAUSE I CAN.
@MarkRein

New Rambo game in development. It will ship bundled with a Neo Geo.
@giordanobc



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GUARDIAN.CO.UK

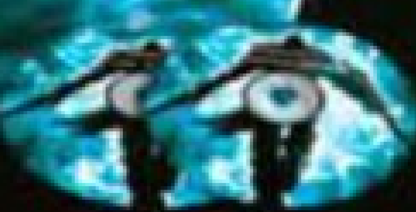
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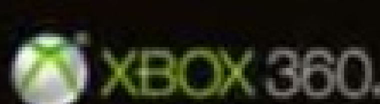
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FROM SOFTWARE





DISPATCHES OCTOBER

Within Dispatches this month, Dialogue sees **Edge**'s readership propose a new way of organising game retail, ponder the most important steps forward in gaming, try to decide which room in the house suits a Wii U, and wonder whether games – and gamers – really are growing up. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** imagines a media mogul in a compromising position, **Leigh Alexander** finds herself shaped by personal context, and **Brian Howe** gets the inside track on Microsoft's plans to shape its entire gaming future around Kinect.



next-gen.biz
Edge on the Web, with links to all of our online activity



Issue 231

Dialogue



Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

Organising chaos

Yesterday I was browsing the shelves of a local videogame shop when I began to realise what a bizarre way all game stores display their stock when compared to music, book or DVD stores. I was standing in the 'O' section, reading the back cover of a copy of *Okami*, and wondered if the shop also had a copy of Clover Studio's other cult classic *God Hand*. This meant wandering all the way down the aisle to the 'G' section. Wanting to peruse a copy of *Viewtiful Joe* would mean trudging back past the point where I started and onwards to the 'V' section at the back of the store.

Can you imagine your local record store insisting you flick through The Rolling Stones discography by starting near the door for Beggars Banquet and ending at the fire exit for Voodoo Lounge? Or how about your local book store demanding you go up and down several escalators in search of a few James Patterson novels? Of course not, it's much more convenient to have the artist's whole discography or bibliography in one place. And even more importantly, it creates a celebration of the artist in their own right, offering up unknown jewels to the uninitiated and placing the developer's name in the limelight rather than just being a mere logo to be button-pressed off the TV screen as quickly as possible. It's almost as if the very people who are trying to sell us these games are missing out on the opportunity of saying: "Hey, look, if you like the game you've picked up, then take a look right here at some other games by the same studio". Yet again, our hobby is set apart from established forms of art by the general media refusing to recognise the talented people within the games industry.

Unfortunately, I guess we have travelled too far down the road to turn back now. Game shops will be reluctant to lose the revenue generated by Auntie Vera popping in to buy *Modern Warfare 3* for her precious little Jimmy and walking out of the store empty-handed because she had neglected to check the 'I' section. Of course this scenario could never possibly happen due to the poor woman being brow-beaten to within an inch of her life by six-foot-tall cardboard soldiers and wall-to-wall copies of the next in a long line of by-the-numbers megahits.

And, as a final thought, I suppose the main fly in the ointment with shops adopting the concept of categorising their stock by studio names is that customers would probably develop arthritis while thumbing through Nintendo's entire back catalogue. I'll make a mental note to wear sensible shoes on my next shopping trip.
Melanie Bottomley

Developers deserve more credit than they usually receive in a retail environment, but we don't foresee a time soon when a studio's name will gain the kind of prominence that the words 'Stephen King' enjoy on book covers. And is there a role for publishers in your ideal world, with games arranged by 'label' as in a record shop? Either way, your local Nintendo section will be increasingly busy thanks to the arrival of your new 3DS.

A giant step for reclining

So what is the biggest step forward in gaming this century from a gamer's point of view? Sure, Kinect is amazing from a technical standpoint, HD looks great and so does 3D etc, etc, but I want to talk about the little things that make a big difference.

Autosave, maybe? How many times has autosave saved you from replaying the past two hours of a game? It's a simple step forward but we all appreciate it, and just imagine playing without it.

Perhaps being able to play your own music from the hard drive while gaming is your number one? I must have 500-600 songs ripped to my 360 hard drive, and while playing *Tiger Woods* with my family, having my music on shuffle during our games of Bingo Bango Bongo makes the evening!

For me, the greatest step forward is simply being able to turn on your console with your pad. You can't beat being laid on the sofa after a hard day at work, wanting a quick blast on your game of the moment, and simply reaching out to the coffee table to grab your pad and start gaming! I would love to hear other readers' thoughts, too. It's always the simple things that make us happy.
Phill Copes

We'll take the simple convenience of wireless controllers. Now, over to you.

Spreading the word

Nintendo's Katsuya Eguchi [**E**230] failed to mention another painfully obvious reason players have lost interest in Wii: a perception of so few quality games.

In truth there's quite a huge amount of quality exclusive games both at retail and online, but not so much the easy-access, easily marketable *Wii Sports* or *Mario Kart* types. Gaming gems of all types seem to be privy only to nerds caring enough to spread the word to previous non-gamers. Nintendo needs a new marketing department, not to mention more Nintendo games. And, by the way, their own support for MotionPlus has been pathetic.
John Oliva

Room with a Wii U

While I am enthralled by the concept of the Wii U, I have a number of concerns about the console. I seem to be in one of the key demographics outlined by Nintendo: I am married with kids and am probably what is considered a core gamer who bought a Wii and all the associated paraphernalia, which ❯

now resides under the staircase. I purchased a PS3 a couple of years after the Wii.

I can see the benefits of being able to play a console while my wife watches the abysmal soap opera Home And Away, or while my daughter watches one of the countless, clearly Pink Floyd-inspired kids' shows. The problem I have is how we use the PS3 and the lack of any feature-matching by the Wii.

Our PS3 is no longer just the game console, it is the centre of our entertainment system. We use the Blu-ray, DVD and CD capabilities, and the digital photo album feature. All of our daughter's favourite DVDs have been uploaded to the device for ready access and we quite often use the video hire feature. We regularly put on the music video channel on a Friday evening, and this one device has made our entertainment device stack nicely minimalist.

Beyond possible voice chat (which is already set up on the PS3) and Web browsing there is no talk of Wii U entertainment features that would cause us to consider swapping. It would be interesting to find out how many other readers use their PS3 for entertainment as much as gaming, and whether this sort of functionality is now expected. If anything, the Wii U is fighting for our bedroom TV, as the battle for our lounge has already been won.
Sergei Nester

If anything, Wii U is fighting for our bedroom TV. The battle for our lounge is already won

Well, there's FaceTime-style video chat, at least. Without a hard drive, though, Wii U is never going to be a like-for-like competitor to Sony's hardware. We have to assume that Nintendo is entirely happy with that.

The growing-up game

I intended to write this letter some months ago, which is only a little ironic given that my subject of today is maturity – and in that time, my own opinion has grown into a different one than you would originally have received. One of your own columnists recently said that our worst enemies in being accepted by the mainstream are ourselves, and in very many ways I agree – both players and industry alike. We've all heard a few thousand *Call Of Duty* players throw out the word 'fag' as an insult and be almost vindicated by the fact that Infinity Ward themselves used it in their marketing campaign for *Modern Warfare 2*. What kind of example does it set to a million horny teenage boys when David Jaffe, creator of several huge gaming franchises, had time to suggest that Kratos would (oh please don't make me write this) have a "FUCKALITY and fuck the SHIT out of Sonya AND Katana at the same motherfucking TIME!!!!" if included in *Mortal Kombat*? I kan but kringe.

And then I began to wonder if, maybe, these were actually just the teenage growing pains of an industry which so wants to be like its Uncle Hollywood, but simply hasn't yet realised its capacity to grow into its own unique person. Are we doomed forever to tantrums like *Shadows Of The Damned* or *Duke Nukem Forever*, criticised for their awkwardly juvenile humour and depictions of women? I truly wasn't sure.

And then I read your preview of *Mass Effect 3*. I was struck by how it should have been laughed out of the room as nothing more than bad sci-fi, but in fact sounded like a deeply engrossing and believable world. The same too of *BioShock Infinite*, which "at its heart... appears to be a very human story, centred on characters who feel vulnerable and real".

Previews of *Skyrim* have already been shouting volumes, while *Journey* takes players on moving adventures without even saying a word. There will always be kids, and those who behave like them. But I can really see a paradigm shift taking place where games, game makers and hopefully even gamers are growing up and becoming their own cultural, as well as financial, force to be reckoned with. To me, that's very exciting.
Lee Hyde

The time has long since passed when a single title can be considered representative of gaming as a whole, and there have always been discerning players and game makers, but as the average age of gamers increases, developers will have to become better at catering for them. Then again, you *did* see *Duke Nukem Forever* storm the charts, yes?

Lee Hyde hails a new era of mature games, with titles such as Irrational's upcoming *BioShock Infinite* at the vanguard



ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to the topics we invite you to discuss on our Web site at next-gen.biz and our Facebook page.

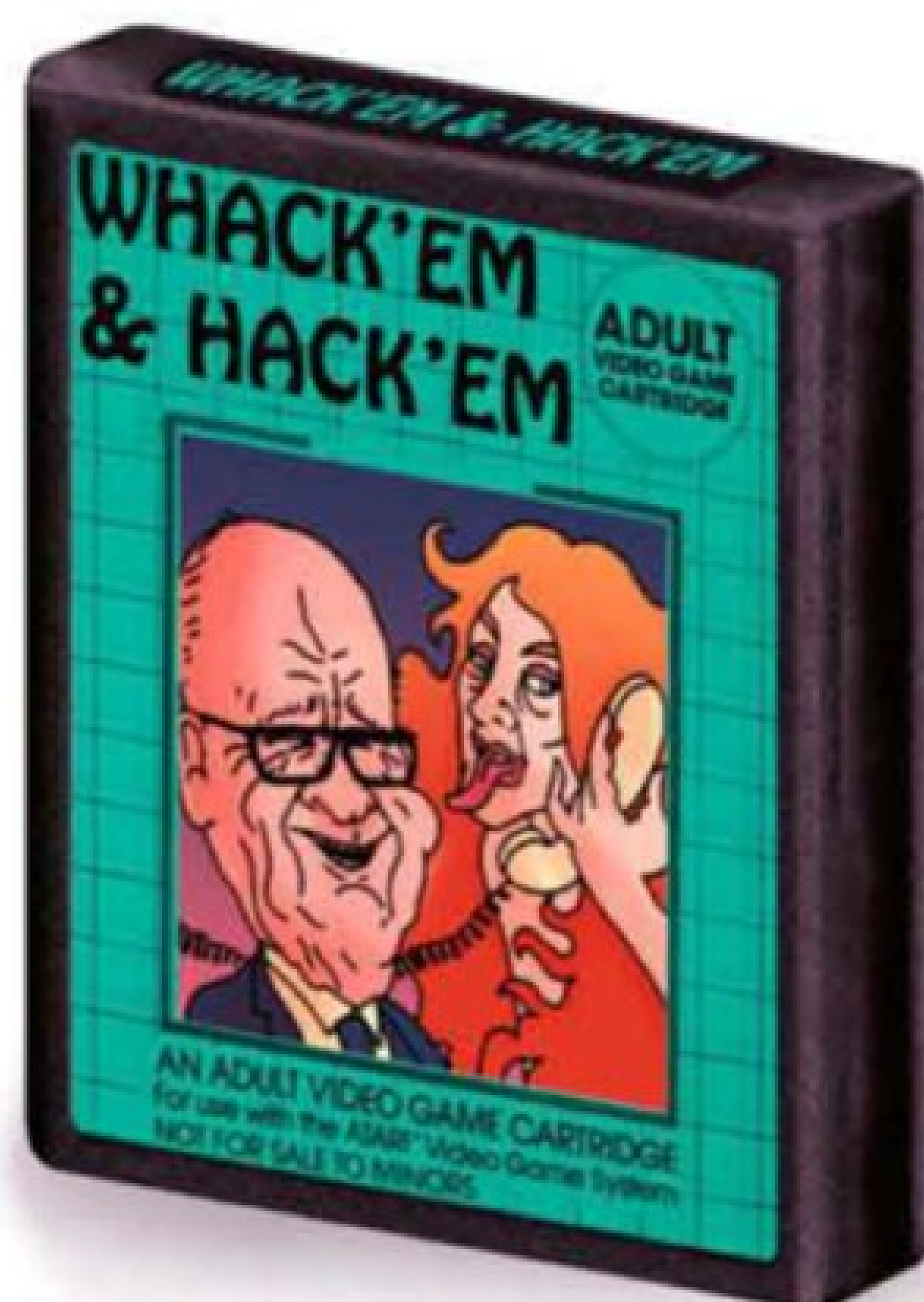
Should Nintendo consider entering the smartphone market?

Why? That's pointless. Stupid and pointless. Why would they ever sell another handheld if they put *Mario Kart* on the iPhone? Stupid!
**Brian Lelas ,
via Facebook**

Just no. I think one iffy mobile gaming platform is enough to keep them busy for a while.
**Pete Butler,
via Facebook**

Depends whether you view there being a future for handheld consoles. Personally, I think there is – my niece and nephew love their DS consoles, but won't be getting a mobile any time soon – just not a long-term future at the current pricing model. Asking £30+ for 3DS games is just not an attractive proposition; gamers expect to pay similar amounts for 360 or PS3 titles. I can see a handheld with £100 RRP for console and £19.99 RRP for games as attractive, a step up from smartphones, but admitting their place as stop-gap gaming between proper console sessions.
**Edward Brown,
via Facebook**

When things turn bad, everyone is going to turn back to Nintendo because gaming won't ever change as long as Nintendo is about games. If Sony, and Microsoft quit, Nintendo will still be here making games for Nintendo.
**Ppxexe DarkRose,
via Facebook**



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STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Why Whack 'Em and Hack 'Em will not be coming to a game store near you any time soon

In America, the Supreme Court has ruled that videogames are protected under the First Amendment's principle of free speech. In Britain, the News Of The World has been closed after further revelations of phone hacking. It is surely time to take advantage of this double newsfruit to produce an updated version of the celebrated Atari 2600 porn game *Beat 'Em And Eat 'Em*. In the new version, the gentleman ejaculating copiously from the rooftops would bear a curious resemblance to Rupert Murdoch, and your two flame-haired naked female avatars, horizontally jockeying with upturned mouths for the precious savoury liquid, would periodically issue gargling statements denying that they knew anything about phone hacking.

The SCOTUS decision is sensible in one way – videogames, being a form of artistic expression (even if they rarely in fact rise above the level of 'entertainment'), qualify as 'speech' just as much as novels or movies do, and should therefore escape censorship. On the other hand, the judgment's practical effect is weird: it was delivered in the context of striking down as unconstitutional a Californian law that made it illegal to sell or rent 'violent video games' to children. That statute defined the games under restriction as those in which the player 'kill[s], maim[s], dismember[s], or sexually assault[s] an image of a human being', thus proving Californian lawmakers hopelessly confused about the relationship between verbs and objects in interactive mimesis. (How exactly do you kill an image? Or sexually assault an image?) Notwithstanding this conceptual muddle, however, I found myself agreeing with the failed law's spirit, inasmuch as I don't think a six-year-old should be playing *Kane & Lynch 2*.

Even had the California law not been overturned, though, I am confident that my jolly Murdochian jizz-quaffing extravaganza would have been accorded an exception under its wise rule that a game would only be banned for sale to children if it 'lack[ed] serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value for minors'. My vision for *Whack 'Em and Hack 'Em* obviously has all those values and more. Tragically, it might still fall foul of US law's 'obscenity' exception to free speech – as though blocky, brightly coloured images of spunking moguls and sperm-swallowing editors would somehow be more 'obscene' than what those characters actually accomplished in real life.

> I agreed with the failed law's spirit. I don't think a six-year-old should play Kane & Lynch 2

The Californian legislature had attempted to define what it was controlling by referring to videogames that, especially, were found to 'appeal to a deviant or morbid interest of minors'. According to the mores of 21st-century society, of course, an eight-year-old staying at home to read a book might well count as deviant and morbid, but graphic representations of torture and murder are perfectly normal and healthy. "For better or worse," Associate Justice Antonin Scalia wrote in the court's opinion, "our society has long regarded many depictions of killing and maiming as suitable features of popular entertainment, including entertainment that is widely available to minors." Roll on *Modern Warfare 3* – you know, for kids?

Meanwhile, the revelations about public deviance and morbidity by hacks hacking phones recalled, tangentially, an all-but-forgotten paradigm in videogaming: that the very rebarbativeness of a technical system could itself be a site of challenging play and exploration. It turns out that phone hacking hardly required much videogame-like methodological imagination or skill in lateral thinking: default voicemail PINs left most people's messageboxes wide open, and a bit of 'social engineering' with helpline operators accomplished the rest.

But 'hacking' has long had a glamorous aesthetic. In TV dramas and films hackers use supercool operating systems (all sharp, flat GUIs) that money can't buy. And I remember spending many happily suspenseful hours playing Steve Cartwright's *Hacker* (1985) on the ZX Spectrum: it was mysterious from the moment you read the instructions, which explained nothing. ('We've told you how to load the program: the rest is up to you.') Sadly, mere gamelike simulations of hacking no longer have the same appeal these days: partly because the eerie, minimalist aesthetic of those early games is now just one of a near-infinite range of UI styles on modern computers, and partly because hacking real networks is so much more interesting and has a much bigger payoff, even if just in terms of publicity for digital Situationists such as LulzSec.

Of course, if any of today's crackers grew up on stuff like *Hacker*, or the film Wargames (which heart-warmingly taught that penetrating military systems persuaded AIs that thermonuclear war was unwinnable, rather than just getting you extradited to the US to endure years of institutionalised torture known as 'solitary confinement'), then such apparently innocuous fictions were at least as 'deviant' as any imaginable tits'n'guns-fest. Indeed, they were surely incitements to terrorism, and should have been banned from sale to adults, never mind minors, before they were ever released.

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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

How personal context shapes our views of a game's level of quality and importance

I'm not trying to be smug – or controversial – when I say *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time* is not one of the greatest videogames ever made. It's not even the greatest *Zelda* game ever made (it might perhaps be third-greatest, but not first). The franchise's formula, which asks players to revisit and rethink all of the gameworld's parts from fresh angles as they gain new skills, weakens when it's slung across a massive Hyrule that can be tedious to traverse and listless outside of its handful of relevant locations.

Ocarina wanted to prove the scope and beauty of three dimensions, and as chunky and imperfect as its visuals appear in hindsight, it did succeed for its time, superficially. Yet it also forced its designers to be more creative than ever about ways to maximise assets; the game's plot ultimately catapults Link seven years into the future and lets him swap between time periods, a clever bit of psychological trickery that makes the game feel large when it's really just the same place, re-skinned a little here and there. You may remember the same strategy from *The Legend of Zelda: A Link To The Past* – a 2D Super Nintendo game that is six years older and gives players far more to do in its world.

Regardless of how one might look critically at *Ocarina*, and no matter how many arguments one might engage on whether it's 'perfect' or not, there's no debate that it's one of the most loved videogames ever made. Plenty of games earn favourable critical reception despite traits that would have sunk a different game in the court of public opinion even before launch.

As well they should, arguably. The list of games that have captured hearts, imaginations and a place in history is full of titles with deep flaws. And while such unlikely favourites can be tough to explain, their champions will tell you something interesting: much of their passion is not about the details of the game, but instead its overall feeling – and playing a primary and much-overlooked role in that sentiment is individual context.

> Context and relatability are underestimated in how they shape opinions of our games

All Nintendo-made games thrive on simple concepts that create familiar patterns for fans, but the *Zelda* series in particular operates on the archetypal story of a boy who leaves home for the first time to become a man, becoming stronger through lessons learned along his way, until he's able to support the people and things he cares about. That story arc is almost as old as humankind itself, probably because allegories for growing up are fundamentally relatable.

Many of the fans who so zealously treasure *Ocarina* today seem to care for the title as a singular, sentimental experience that they have rarely, if ever had repeated. Gaming is a young enough medium that it's only just now beginning to see its third generational group join the space; for the second-gen console gamers who are now in their 20s and early 30s, *Ocarina* was a formative experience during the span of teen years. Launching in North America and Europe right around Christmas, countless gamers recall exciting holidays spent with siblings or cousins, the game a gift, after-school winters spooling into terminal summers of quiet exploration, or of joyful discoveries shared.

People don't talk about *Ocarina* in terms of graphics or level design; they talk about it in terms of the context in which they remember playing. Everything about the game spoke directly to those who were intended to enjoy it, and as such it was intangible things, shared culture, that made it brilliant and beloved – not the sort of things you could ever hope to quantify on Metacritic.

Context and relatability are woefully underestimated in how they shape our opinions of the games we play. The mind of the game designer tends to prize specifics, not abstracts, and to him or her designing a great experience comes from practical iteration on design components, not musing on ways to be sure a 14-year-old will never forget having gotten the product as a birthday gift. Meanwhile, the gaming press has long operated under a sense of obligation to dissolve personal experience and discuss games neutrally.

None of that helps. Games that define how people recall a period of time in their lives or with whom they shared the experience are the ones that are remembered as truly great. Playing *Mario 2* in a basement with my neighbour, making up songs for luck, is a sharper memory of 'social play' than anything I've ever done on Facebook.

There are films about wartime, songs about youth issues, books about living in the digital age. Alongside them, videogames – from how we make them to how we talk about them and what we call 'good' – often seem disinterested in the hard-to-define elements that create greatness and permanence in others' lives.

It's a shame we're often so eager to divest ourselves of personal feelings around games. The lasting memories we have of childhood play don't need to be the province of our past, so long as we've got games that can speak to who we are today – and we listen.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media



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BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

A behind-the-curtain glimpse at Microsoft's bid to bring hardcore gamers and Kinect together

With its many contact points, the traditional videogame controller is like a violin: great for adepts but unwelcoming to newcomers. As business models go, 'impregnably arcane' can fare poorly in the open marketplace. How do you convince somebody's grandparents or little sister to master the violin for the privilege of playing *Halo*? With Kinect, Microsoft ingeniously answered: "You don't. Just give them cymbals and let them crash around." Thanks to Kinect, we game in a new era of total accessibility, except for paraplegics, asthmatics, heavy mouthbreathers, people with small flats, the terminally lazy, the tragically uncoordinated and mummies (as mummies are very slow).

Given the runaway success of Kinect, it's no surprise that Microsoft is pushing all of its firstparty IPs to support it, per an E3 announcement. What is surprising is the depth of integration that's being called for, as revealed by a secret presentation that an unnamed Microsoft executive allegedly gave to the gathered developers. We obtained this transcript from a somewhat dodgy whistleblower – under the trenchcoat and false moustache, we're pretty sure it was a mummy. So take this with a grain of salt (mummies are honest, but easily confused). Mostly, only the executive's voice was audible on the recording:

"As you know, Kinect offers one-to-one motion tracking, so gamers can feel the difference between their palsied bodies and those of their godlike avatars more keenly. Voice recognition enhances realism and immersion: instead of pushing a button, you verbally command someone whose back you're riding on to toss a grenade, just like you would in a real battle situation. And the user interface makes you feel like you're in Minority Report, if the entire plot revolved around listlessly queuing up episodes of The Office on Netflix. While we understand the importance of not implementing new tech willy-nilly, it isn't an issue in our case, because there is literally no IP imaginable that deep Kinect functionality would not improve. To help you achieve it, I've got notes. Ready?

"*Halo 4* team, we think the core players are really going to enjoy brandishing a mop handle and yelling "bang! pow!" to operate their weapons. Sure, there have been snafus with the vocal command recognition, but now that we've got the profanity filters humming along in voice chat, we shouldn't see any more incidents of Master Chief trying to "go fuck himself". Our concern is that the game is still too hard and too dark for a casual audience. We'd love for the user to be able to just shout, "Master Chief! Winning!" from which point the game finishes itself. And as for the dark tone, don't forget that Kinect has augmented reality capabilities. Why not let the user scan in her own textiles, replacing all those gloomy textures with a nice pink rockrose pattern?

"*Fable: The Journey* team – this one practically designs itself. What players love most about *Fable* is the everyday realism it brings to human interactions. Personally, I was hopeless with 'the ladies' until I learned from *Fable* that intimacy blossoms from an obscure combination of singing, dancing and belching. That's how I wooed my wife – she cursed my disreputable character at first, but 100 Funky Chickens later, she only had eyes for me. If you thought pushing a button to trigger a dancing animation was engaging, wait until you get to actually dance that animation, over and over and over. Obviously there will be some health liability waivers stashed in the EULA for this one.

"*Mass Effect 3*, I've got three words for you: total physical immersion. And three more: softcore space porn. See where I'm going here? We've got another team working on a peripheral, the Kinect Real Doll, which features full-spectrum biofeedback and 11 warm, steamy USB ports. We'll talk more.

> The Kinect Real Doll features full-spectrum biofeedback and 11 warm, steamy USB ports

"We're running low on time, so I want to open the floor to questions. Yes, you in the back, with your fists balled madly in your hair. Hmmm... I hear you, but as a term of art, we prefer 'logically innovative' to 'absurd'.

"Next question? Uh-huh. We've definitely considered that, and we're pretty sure that virtual coitus is like virtual killing – the parents of *Mass Effect* fans won't mind as long as the skins read alien or robot.

"*Fable* team, you have the floor, though we'd appreciate it if you'd cut out the gentle weeping. There, there. That's better. Yes, we know this is risky, but we figure we can do whatever we want as long as our competitor, who shan't be named, keeps leaking its customers' personal data like a sieve.

"I think we have time for one more... yes, the gentleman here by the podium, with the wire on his trenchcoat and the crooked moustache."

[Inarticulate moaning.]

"What's that? You're moaning... um, OK. I'm not sure what your aversion to fire has to do with this meeting, but we appreciate the feedba... wait a moment. Who let a mummy in here? A bugged one, no less? And shambling towards me! Guards! Guaaaaaaards!"

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THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

Building connections



A few years ago, developers needed only to whimper the word 'microtransaction' to guarantee waves of Internet outrage. The flames of that debate have long since been extinguished beneath a deluge of hats. Our prediction: the same thing will soon be said of the latest tinderbox – games that require a permanent Internet connection.

Diablo III (p40) may have sparked controversy with its auction house, but it's the 'always online' requirement that has really set fans afroth. It's not the only one. Ubisoft's titles, *Driver San Francisco* (p112) included, routinely make such a demand of PC players. Furious feedback threads imply Ubi's servers fail to validate connecting players more than is really acceptable, but the system works – which remains to the chagrin of laptop owners who wish to play their purchased titles with nary an ethernet cable or access point in sight.

The truth is that this portion of the playerbase is a small bubble on the Venn diagram – and it's shrinking further. Being always online is increasingly a fact of our lives, not to mention a fact of PC usage. Obviously, many services such as Steam make use of your connection to update software in the background, but games themselves rely on it beyond their explicit multiplayer modes. What would *Super Meat Boy* or *Trials HD* be without leaderboards? With *Journey* (p68), the frisson of human contact is vital to the game's sense of scale and isolation.

Developers need to make online functionality fundamentally meaningful in order to sell the idea of a constant connection. In the case of *Diablo III*, this seems more than likely, given the sort of sophisticated social featureset that Blizzard's Battle.net provides. With wireless tech providing ever better coverage and cloud gaming a reality, being always online won't just be a requirement of gaming, it'll soon be synonymous with the act of computing itself.

MOST WANTED

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
360, PC, PS3
Now that we've slunk and elbow-stabbed our way through the smoggy streets of the latest *Deus Ex*, we're looking for the next unwieldy quest-drenched world to tumble into. *Skyrim* promises that *plus dragons*.

Metro: Last Light
360, PC, PS3
Its predecessor may have stumbled in the dark, but we're extremely eager to see whether the follow-up to 4A's dystopia trims off some of its cumbersome, punitive mechanical dogma, and lets you lose yourself in its terrifying underworld.

Guild Wars 2 PC
Two words: underwater combat. ArenaNet's laudable execution of this new combat experience bodes well for *Guild Wars 2* as a whole. No oxygen bar, no sluggish paddling, just fluid (pun *so* intended) movement. Simply plunge beneath the surface and the world seamlessly opens itself up.

HYPE

DIABLO III

Skill trees are out and real-world money's in as Blizzard redefines the ARPG

Publisher	Blizzard
Developer	In-house
Format	Mac, PC
Origin	US
Release	TBA

Blizzard's imagination is unmistakable, regardless of which of its worlds you're exploring. *Diablo III* proves that dark fantasy doesn't have to be gloomy: its beasts are a comic-book pleasure to behold

Diablo III is a game of revolutionary shifts and instant gratification: an RPG built for an audience that craves an almost impossible combination of excess, depth and immediacy. It's revolutionary in that it seeks to entirely rewrite the fundamentals of character crafting, and it's gratifying because despite those changes it will feel like you've been doing things this way forever, from your first click to your last. The results are also, to use the stage-managed understatement of Blizzard's vice president of game design, **Rob Pardo**, "quite fun to play".

And it's no paradox, either. Blizzard has the resources to spend the best part of a decade working – and reworking – every last detail of a complex formula, yet it also has the design experience to ensure that such an enormity of interlocking systems and variable mechanics all end up channelled directly into a game that unfolds with no friction and no confusion. As the beta nears, every element in

The Monk bristles with heavy-damage arcade finishing moves and combo fodder

Diablo III bows down before the power of one simple click: the click that busts up zombies, vacuums loot, activates audiolog lore books and – now – even allows you to re-spec your character on the fly.

And there lies one of the game's two big ideas: a reshaping of the RPG progression system that does away with points and trees in favour of simply giving you a new skill – which will grow more powerful as you do – with each new level. Although *Diablo III* still forces you to focus yourself somewhat, offering at first only two and eventually just six active skill slots (along with three passives, an evolution of the series' troubled traits system), within that you can then swap abilities in and out to your heart's content, changing the fundamental nature of your character from one encounter to the next.

It's startling stuff. Instead of plotting a course through each of the five classes and connecting the dots that would normally spell out 'tank' or 'healer', *Diablo III* encourages you to play across the entire class at once. Naturally it helps that, in order to encourage you further in that direction, its various skills generally possess a sugary sweetshop clarity that can leave other games seeming flavourless and ill-defined. The Barbarian, the only class to make the transition from previous games intact, could be your standard melee-master enlivened by some stone-shattering audio, but his skills make him new again, allowing players to chain Frenzy attacks that pick up speed with each blow, or harpoon enemies and then reel them in with Ancient Spear. It's a move that augments the class's limited range, but it also turns him into a deadly fisherman, vicious and, to borrow the quiet precision of game director **Jay Wilson**, "very durable".

Elsewhere, the Wizard can shift from satisfying standards such as Electrocute to arcane mortar attacks and laser beams, and the Monk – like the Barbarian, another melee class, but built around speed rather than damage – seems to have launched himself into Sanctuary from the coin-op world of *Street Fighter II*. He bristles with heavy-damage arcade finishers like the Seven-Sided Strike and combo fodder such as Exploding Palm, which grows more powerful on every successive click. In sharp contrast to his pious backstory, his choppy animations and lightning punches make him a blood-boiling delight to play.

Blizzard's just getting warmed up, though, and it's the Witch Doctor and the Demon Hunter that truly demonstrate the game's firework combat designs at their most excessive. The former is more pet shop than pet class, as you wobble through the world summoning toads, teetering Jenga towers of zombies, spiders, "and all that stuff that ten-year-old boys love", as Wilson puts it, while the Demon Hunter could be mistaken for a Camden Town neo-dandy in his boho scarf and leather skinny jeans – but plays, thankfully, like Batman. He's a ranged gadgeteer who's able to summon everything from smoke screens and spectral bear traps to a trio of grenades that can be lobbed, casually,





BELOW **Although the graphical style is simple and clear, lighting and particle effects make *Diablo III* a game you'll want to see running well. As ever, though, it will scale to all kinds of machines**

Dungeons are generated procedurally, although they rarely feel like it. It's only on your third or fourth pass through the campaign that you'll begin to notice





Leah is there to provide clues to the game's backstory and aid in combat during some of the more intense moments. Blizzard is focusing more on story content than may be customary to *Diablo* fans

at whichever of Hell's footsoldiers happen to be in his way at the time, and although he may head into the Festering Woods looking as if he's more likely to try and secure a six-month lease on a loft conversion than scour the land of the undead, he still leaves an enviable trail of smoking ribcages in his wake.

Diablo III's five heroes look like specific people, with the Witch Doctor's grasping hands and long-limbed frame bent almost double as she inches forward, bringing a touch of swampish, gumbo-infused voodoo to the game's mostly European fantasy landscapes, while the Wizard, according to Wilson, is named after a term, that "in the world of *Diablo*, is used almost in a derogatory fashion. Mages and sorcerers see 'wizards' as young upstart kids that are messing with magic that shouldn't be messed with. They're dealing with stuff that normal sorcerers and mages are frightened of: the weather, time, and space". It's a revelation that adds factional nuance to the fiction even as it explains the class's wonderfully precarious combination of punchy, overpowered attacks and fragile defences.

Furthering the distinction between classes, each comes with its own resource, some, like the Barbarian's Fury, requiring damage to top up, while others, such as the Wizard's Arcane Power, regenerate quickly over time. If that wasn't enough of a balancing challenge for the design team, the Demon Hunter heads into battle with two meters: a fast-building Hatred for powering offensive skills, and a slower Discipline, for defensives.

It's a system that points towards a wider cross-class trend: attack skills built around specific situations. "*Diablo* has always had a very simple combat model that tends to focus on a single attack that you just use over and over again," Wilson admits, unconsciously clicking as he speaks. "One of the things we wanted to do with *Diablo III* was create a little more depth in combat and give the player a little more to do. So we've still got spammable attacks, but we also have this concept of breakout abilities, which can't be used as often but really change up what the player's doing. Lastly, there's escape abilities. One of the things we focused on here is making sure the player's a little more threatened than they were before. In previous *Diablo* games you could out-run, out-potion or Town Portal your way to safety. We're tending to focus away from those mechanics, so now each class has a different way of dealing with threats."

Abilities that aid an easy getaway may not sound like much fun, but in Blizzard's hands they've become colourful and ingenious.



Dark artisans

"One of the things we wanted to do in *Diablo III* was give you a lot more ability to interact with the item game," Wilson explains, while introducing the three NPCs that make up the new artisan crafting system. "We've got a blacksmith, whose job is to craft items, a jeweller who focuses on gems and socketing, and the mystic who can enhance items." Blizzard's ensuring that the system offers a good balance between predictable outcomes and random elements. "We didn't want to take the randomness out of the system, but we wanted the player to be able to direct what they were going to get a little bit more," Wilson admits.

The wizard makes up for poor defensive options with some of the most agreeable offensive tricks. It's a typically extreme approach to the class

Wizards can create little bubbles of slowed time, allowing them to control fights better once the projectiles start firing, Monks can lay down sanctuaries that enemies can't pass through, while the Witch Doctor can summon a floating Shaman that turns foes into chickens. It's escape, in other words, of the ACME Corporation variety.

Meanwhile, to counteract the steady, regimented unlock of each class's skills, players are encouraged to mess around with rune stones whenever possible. These are loot drops that act as modifiers, each one fitting into a skill's single socket and flaring it in an interesting direction. The Witch Doctor's toads can become a rain of toads, flaming toads, or one giant mega-toad depending on which rune you add, for example. When skill loadouts are combined as a whole, it's even possible, as Wilson demonstrates, to take the fragile ranged-fighter blueprint of the Wizard and transform her into a close-up battlemage by socketing defensive skills with a range of splashback damage modifiers, or turn area-of-effect abilities into something that feels more like armour. "You can modify a skill so drastically that you change the nature of it," Wilson says, adding that while there's currently no cost for removing runes on an ad-hoc basis, the designers are exploring ways to incentivise sticking with certain decisions.

The forthcoming beta provides a welcome chance to explore the early stages of each class in some detail, and the hour-long nine- or ten-level ramble from the zombie-besieged town of New Tristram – where the sky is falling and the dead are rising – through to the halls of Leoric the Skeleton King will leave you fizzing with magic and loaded



bit.ly/p3CNeR
Screenshot gallery







Characters should remain recognisable regardless of what they're wearing – no mean feat given the depths of Blizzard's randomised loot tables. Luckily, readability lessons learned in *WOW* have been carried over

down with trinkets. Quests chain together effortlessly in a manner that suggests kiting lessons from *Cataclysm*'s pacy reworking of Azeroth have not been forgotten, while there is a promising range of enemies available in even the early levels, from Wretched Mothers, who eat the dead and then spew zombies from their mouths, to Grotesques, rotten little marshmallow fatties that can take an astonishing amount of damage before exploding in a toxic shower of worms.

The beta supports fourplayer co-op, but also throws you into questing alongside AI 'followers' fairly regularly, including major NPCs such as Leah, the adopted niece of series standard Deckard Cain, who quickly becomes a swashbuckling expositionary device to tie the complex backstory together. The demon-slaying fiction of the *Diablo*

If Blizzard's right, the economics of the situation may obliterate gold farming

series is epic drama on restless fast-forward – in its abrupt segueing from creation myth to end-days saga, it can feel like the bible cut down to just Genesis and Revelations by an editor with the thrifty white-trash smarts of Elmore Leonard – and that same drive for immediacy can be seen in many of the game's new ancillary systems, too. Beyond the dynamic reinvention of skills and the clockwork unlock of fresh slots to store them in, players can now sell items, break them down into crafting materials, and even activate a town portal from within their inventory screen once they've collected the three requisite artefacts. Speaking of the inventory, asked if there's a danger that *Diablo III*'s central abilities are now so captivating that they may lead the eye and the brain away from the more modest charms of the loot system, technical designer **Wyatt Cheng** suggests that "on the flip side, the rune system is item-based, so in a sense, once you start to see the runes and how they totally modify your skills, you could say that in some ways we've made the best loot ever".

If skills and runes define the first of *Diablo III*'s revolutions, it's loot that lies at the heart of the second – and far more controversial – change. *Diablo III* will allow you to trade the loot you pick up in-game with other players, via auction houses built directly into the client. One allows you to make purchases with in-game gold, the other offers the opportunity to spend real-world currency. It's not only the Wizard that is playing with lightning, then.

Blizzard's official line on this is that *Diablo*'s always been a trading-based experience with no bespoke system to support it, and so the addition of auction houses is merely a chance to bring transactions back within the game, away from the wilds of eBay and the badlands of unaffiliated forums. It's an admission of previous oversights that, given the developer's obsession for both detailing and patching, doesn't seem very convincing, but the team's sticking with it: the new trading mechanics are design-driven and largely concerned with keeping players safe and taking 'nominal' fees at the points of listing and sale in order to ensure that only loot of value gets posted (although there will be an additional fee extracted by a thirdparty money provider if you want to 'cash out' of Battle.net).

If Blizzard's right, the economics of the situation may well obliterate gold farming by driving the costs down – when we're all gold farmers, it's going to be harder to gouge – and it will be interesting, at least, to see if any of the wider game gets caught in the blast. *Diablo III*'s instanced campaigns should be fairly well protected from forces of hyper-deflation, as long as you've got the willpower to avoid bargain-priced swords, but there's no telling whether the option to legitimately work the game's loot tables means that merely exploring them will start to feel a little more like toil for some players.

It's bold thinking, but this is Blizzard, where bold thinking fits in nicely alongside the apocalyptic story arcs, the luminous Turner-influenced colour palettes and the Jack Kirby hero designs. *Diablo III*, then, is about as bold as games can get, ceaselessly driving you towards violence – and now commerce – with each shift of the mouse, and confidently reshaping its players, one click at a time.

Q&A
Wyatt Cheng
Technical designer



Stat-heavy dungeon-crawlers can often leave players feeling a little empty – how can you give the formula more substance?
For me, it's the idea I can always try something new and feel like it's me. By the time you're level 30, you've got around 25 skills and all the rune customisations, and it almost becomes an expression of my own creativity. When I step away from the game, and I go to Disneyland or something, I could be on a ride, and I'll say: "Wait a minute, what if I combine Locust Swarm with Haunt and Horrify? I can't wait to get back home and try that out." That idea that I came up with something interesting and unique to me is really compelling.

How do you design enemies that can cope with player choices?
When it comes to player skills we want variety and novelty. When it comes to monsters, obviously we want challenge, but on par with challenge is interest. We can make a monster challenging by raising HP. What's trickier is making it fun to fight. Player skills are important with that, but interesting monster behaviours are designed on their own. Some builds are going to come across certain types of monsters and will annihilate them, while some will have a lot more trouble. There's always going to be trade-offs.

Was it scary to remove skill points?
Relative to the development cycle of the entire game, skill points being removed is relatively recent. We had skill points at BlizzCon, and that was not very long ago. It came out of playtesting, ultimately. An example I like to use is the Wizard. Magic Missile: it's very obviously a single-target skill. Then there's Arcane Orb, which is multi-target. But what happens when I have ten points in Arcane Orb? Now it does more damage in AOE situations, but it also does more damage in single target situations, and that's all because of the skill points. It became very obvious that we had to fix this.

Blizzard's audiences often see classes as puzzles, with a race to the optimum build. Are runes a means of countering that?
Some players, if you said the optimal way to play the game would be to use one skill, starve yourself, and hit the same key every two seconds, they'd do it. Other players would be like: "I actually just play creative expression style. I don't care about doing the best". Sometimes, in these contexts, that kind of player can get left behind. The rune system is about catering to both audiences at once. A min-max player is always going to min-max.





LEFT **Blizzard's character designs retain their painterly quality even when they're transformed into 3D models.** RIGHT **Just as much time has been spent crafting the enemies as its hero classes. The best designs instantly key you in to the things you should be worried about**





Design showcase

When it comes to fantasy art, Blizzard is in a league of its own



LEFT **Hero banners will allow you to show off your in-game achievements and the level of your character.** RIGHT **It simply wouldn't be *Diablo* without skeletons to fight, and the series' signature enemy will be in fine rattly form here.** BELOW **Blizzard's high-colour exteriors give the lie to the thought that dungeon crawlers are dank and dirty games set underground. This is a glittering landscape filled with rich detail, and a journey that will take you from forests to deserts**









HYPE

RAGE


Unleashing the fury on the first two hours of id's scorched-Earth shooter

Publisher	Bethesda Softworks
Developer	Id Software
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	US
Release	October 4 (US), October 7 (EU)



bit.ly/pYeyva
More from id's Tim Willits

Enemies are quickly alert to your presence, and the game doesn't offer the opportunities for stealth seen in *Deus Ex: Men In Vents*. Nonetheless, a few silent takedowns with the wingstick help thin numbers. These bladed boomerangs will take off a head, or bury themselves in a brainpan for later retrieval, but shatter if they clip scenery







Some enemies will rush you with melee weapons while others sit behind cover and shoot. Grenades are handy for flushing out the latter or otherwise exploding them into a fine red vapour. The flip side to this tactic is that their spare ammunition and inventory is also lost in the bloody mist

When astronomers decided to name a near-Earth asteroid 'Apophis', after the Egyptian god of darkness and chaos, it wasn't just because they liked the name. Its exact trajectory is uncertain, but if we're unlucky – to the tune of 250,000 to one – then on April 13 2036, *Rage* happens: Apophis will plough into our planet creating the perfect post-apocalyptic playground.

You'll be OK, though – plugged into a stasis booth, veins full of life-replenishing nanites, locked beneath the surface in a heavily shielded chamber called an Ark. When you stumble from the container years later, you discover that America is now an irradiated desert, plagued by mutants, harried by bandits and ruled by a draconian force known as the Authority – which appears to have an unhealthy interest in Ark survivors.

There are some good men left, however.



Returning to areas sees enemies respawn, and the wasteland offers an endless supply of cash-creating corpses. The game takes you back to the mutant lairs and bandit camps, anyway

Attention to detail is evident in every rusting pipe, in every staked, rotting head

One by the name of Dan Hagar saves you from becoming a bandit's trophy-kill moments after your emergence. He drives you back to his ramshackle outpost, whereupon the game's RPG-lite aspirations slowly emerge. *Rage* remains a gutsy shooter at its core, but distributes its action across the wasteland in discrete, linear missions, bouncing the player between human settlements and funnelling action from the sprawling desert hub into more conventional corridor shooter spokes, gated by loading screens.

As in an RPG, distractions slowly rack up as we talk to inhabitants of the Hagar settlement, and later their Outrigger neighbours. Eventually we find ourselves in the larger hub town of Wellspring, in which a jobs board advertises a multitude of deliveries, and the nearby racecourse challenges us to pit our buggy against others in exchange for upgrades. *Rage* eases you in to its RPG mission structure, however: the only quest available at the start is to mop up the bandits who first attacked us – the Ghosts, as they are known – before they turn their attentions on the Hagar settlement.

It's a short trip on a quad bike to their stronghold: a dishevelled hotel, since converted into a macabre shrine replete with staked skulls and other grisly mementos, its crumbling facade teetering on a precipice strung with zip-lines and circled by dirigibles. While the first few Ghosts fall beneath our wrath, the mission doesn't play out quite as we intend, for reasons that we shall not spoil, but culminates in a bloody exfiltration through collapsed corridors and lobbies – cramped, linear environments which leave little opportunity to flank or circumvent your foes, but offer plenty of short-range brutality and a few slickly staged scripted tricks. Later, when your toolbag involves spider-bots, sentry guns and explosive RC cars, the vicious possibilities of combat open up – but such advances are, naturally enough, drip-fed.

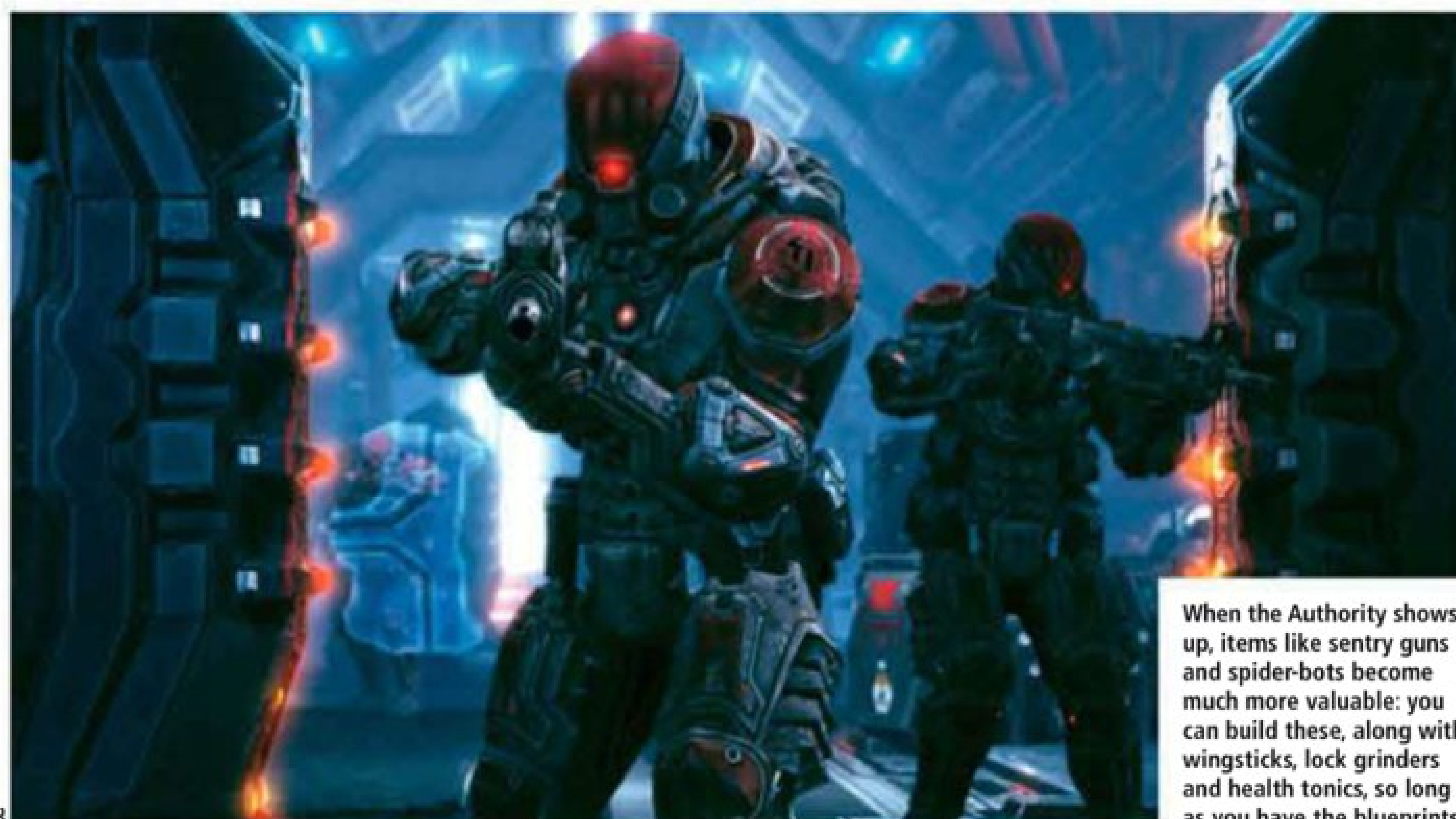
The claustrophobic scenery does prove to be a minor but recurring problem for us. The intense detail of the environment comes at the cost of navigation, some areas bounded off by invisible walls or rubble that it is impossible to scale. Yet it still remains easy to catch yourself on protruding debris, as you try to leap around the tightly enclosed spaces. In the open expanse of the wasteland, vehicle



Without warning

Rage marks a brief reconciliation between id and the USK, Germany's ratings board. "One hundred per cent uncut in Germany!" Willits says. "Can you believe that? For us on the production side, it makes things way easier. We don't have to make a separate German version which no one would buy anyway – they'd just have bought the Austrian version."

Tragic events in Norway may yet have an effect, however. "The German office has said that cultural sensitivities are already beginning to ratchet back up," says Willits. "If we'd submitted a week later, we might not have passed."



When the Authority shows up, items like sentry guns and spider-bots become much more valuable: you can build these, along with wingsticks, lock grinders and health tonics, so long as you have the blueprints



combat is the rule – pacey, riotous and over quickly if you find yourself on the wrong end of a rocket. It's here that the longer-range weapons come in handy, hopping out of your buggy to depopulate a distant bandit blockade before their missiles can dent your fender.

It's here, amid the sheer faces of red rock and precipitously stacked strata, that the game's beauty is made most apparent, throwing out massive vistas of unusually credible geology. But the crumbling, jury-rigged hideouts and outposts are stunning in their own decrepit way – attention to detail is evident in the twist of every rusting pipe, in every staked, rotting head. *Rage*'s lighting engine encourages this madly hot, hallucinogenic feel, painting depth and shade in lurid colours. As sumptuous as its macabre art direction is, the 360 we were playing on clearly creaked under the pressure – seemingly unloading textures the second you looked away from them, then hurriedly (but not hurriedly enough) popping them back in when you turned around. No doubt id is optimising as we speak, but this, combined with other shaky 360 outings, suggests that Microsoft's hardware is nearing its limit.

The mission possibilities really begin to proliferate just as our demo time ends, but it's already clear that *Rage* dips into a much broader palette than id shooters past. The confined missions have the craft and control that comes with linearity, but they are hung together by sorties to settlements and punctuated by panicked dashes across the desert. Id hasn't traditionally done down-time, and it's ironic that it's in a game called *Rage* that relaxation becomes such an important part of the pace. ■

Q&A
Tim Willits
Creative director, *Rage*



The FPS has been increasingly dominated by linear, heavily scripted games. Is a lack of choice quintessentially massmarket? Is a non-linear game almost a boutique experience these days?

That's a sad observation! But I don't think a lack of choice makes something massmarket. A really good game is massmarket. The great thing about games like *Call Of Duty* is that they're easy to get into and everything is presented really well. *Rage* is a big game, but we tried to work on accessibility. In the first two hours you're led around by the hand: you've got one place to go to, one guy to talk to. If we were to dump people in Wellspring, we'd lose a ton of gamers who'd be overwhelmed. The wasteland's pretty straightforward, it's hard to get lost, but when we first started making the game we just had a compass to point you in the right direction. No one could find what they wanted. Then we added a minimap with a dot. No one could find what they wanted. So we added a minimap with a dot and a breadcrumb trail which blinks in the direction you're meant to go. Games like *Rage* now face expectations, not based on the last id game, but the last *Call Of Duty* game. We had about 100 or so testers come to this facility in Dallas. They had no idea what they were going to play, other than it was an FPS. And we had a number make statements like: "In *Call Of Duty*, when I do this, this happens, but in *Rage* something else happens – are they going to fix that?" So people bring their perception of the rules from *Call Of Duty*, or whatever the last popular game they played was, and that's something you have to overcome.

What did those people make of the crafting system?

They thought it was a fantastically new thing! They look at our games in a completely different way. A game like *Black Ops* sells 20 million copies; a huge percentage of those players will have never played an id Software game. We had one guy come in who said his favourite game was *Black Ops*, but then said he didn't play firstperson shooters. It's a different world.

And id's a different studio – you've grown up, got families.

Oh yeah, at home I have triplets so we play fourplayer co-op games like *Castle Crashers* and *LittleBigPlanet*. Kinect games are popular in the Willits home, too. If I can get myself and three seven-year-olds to jump from one platform to another moving platform, I deserve a trophy.

HYPE

RIDGE RACER UNBOUNDED

Namco goes FlatOut to give its old-school racer a modern twist

Publisher	Namco Bandai
Developer	Bugbear Entertainment
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	Finland
Release	2012

Billed by producer **Joonas Laakso** as a "new branch of *Ridge Racer*" and, he asserts in his dry Scandinavian tones, "definitely not *Ridge Racer 8*", *Unbounded* sees Namco's long-standing series on loan to a European developer. Bugbear's track record with the *FlatOut* series is clearly what drew Namco Bandai to the small Finnish studio (with a headcount of 45 – and no intention of going too far beyond that). Regardless of the game's position in the *Ridge Racer* canon, the team's intentions are made loud and clear by Laakso: "We are going after the arcade action crown." The success of Criterion's *Need For Speed Hot Pursuit* may have encouraged the team but the closest gameplay relative to *Unbounded*, we discover, is actually Black Rock's *Split/Second*.

Some hands-on time with the game reveals a successful marriage between Bugbear's penchant for destruction and the drifting, pedal-to-the-metal gameplay of classic *Ridge Racer*. As we blitz around the track on our first lap, there's no need to let off the gas. Tapping the B button sends your shiny little wagon into an immediate drift, allowing you to build up your power meter. Carefully navigating each bend and darting around the many posts and pillars strewn around the map requires concentration.

It's at this point that Laakso lets us know that we're playing it wrong. To really fill that power meter we need to crash into as many objects and smash through as many cement fixtures as possible. The indestructible nature of traditional *Ridge Racer* vehicles has been taken to another level by Bugbear: a head-on collision with a stone pillar is rewarded with more bars on your power meter and not a millisecond knocked off your lap time. Once the power meter is filled, map-specific walls and opposing racers are highlighted with a reticule. Tap the A button within range of your target and bang – you turn stone to dust and metal to shrapnel. Successfully exploding through a wall or wiping out the opposition is rewarded with points that feed into the overall campaign and, of course, a *Burnout*-esque cinematic money shot of your handiwork. The other payoff for successful collisions is a plume of particle effects and some quite exquisite, beautiful destruction. Shards of glass rain down, cement crumbles, and the pulse rises.

> ***Tap a button within range of your target and bang – you turn stone to dust***

Intentionally crashing into everything in your way is a hard pill to swallow for any dedicated racing fan (and any law-abiding citizen), but after a few laps it becomes second nature. The task becomes less about sticking to the beaten track and more about identifying the most rewarding fixtures littered around the streets. Not everything is destructible, of course, and there are some things that must be avoided even in this big, bombastic battlefield of a racecourse. Head-on collisions with civilian cars are show-stopping, bonnet-crumpling affairs that severely hamper your progress. And hitting a wall at 100mph (as we foolishly do numerous times) without the power meter filled has the expected, fatal effect. It's perhaps unsurprising that the game's environments are among the stars of the show, as Laakso explains: "We've been making destructible environments for 11 years."

The cars look like hybrids of *Ridge Racer*'s smooth, shiny automobiles and *FlatOut*'s more rough-and-ready powerhouses. Neither brand has ever been particularly obsessed with tuning statistics, and *Unbounded* doesn't look set to buck the trend. Though Laakso maintains that it's a "racing game at heart", the impression from our time with *Unbounded* is that it's more about the action than the thrill of the race. Taking pole position plays



Unbounded is colourful, bold and bursting with action. Developer Bugbear is quick to separate its title from the many predecessors



RIDGE RACER UNBOUNDED



In *Unbounded*, unstoppable cars meet countless movable (and destructible) objects. It's undoubtedly the fastest and most aggressive *Ridge* in the legendary series

Initiating your power boost obliterates almost anything in your path. Taking down the opposition blocking your route is a satisfying moment that feels more like an FPS headshot than a typical arcade vehicle collision





second fiddle to your exploration of the track, as you scavenge for every barrel, statue and bollard you can see in the blurred edges of your peripheral vision. There are special, as-yet-unspecified, rewards for taking down hard-to-find structures and monuments, though Laakso promises that the difficulty curve will be much slighter than that of *FlatOut*.

One of the crucial challenges facing *Unbounded* will be striking the perfect balance between item placement and funnelling your efforts into winning the race. As it stands, it's too easy to get sidetracked by all the shiny, smashable objects dotted around the track. The extravagant, instant drifting also needs to be carefully balanced with the supreme power of the vehicles. The criteria for what is destructible and what isn't can be unclear, too, leading you to drift around corners under the false impression that you can smash easily through the scenery on a bend when, in fact, you'll be stopped dead in your tracks. The option to highlight or colour-code destructible barriers might be a way out of this trap, but in Bugbear's defence this is still very early days. Though still in a pre-alpha state, if the game can successfully merge these two unlikely breeds of racer, resulting in a game that's hectic and lightning fast but honours the focus and simplicity of *Ridge Racer*, *Unbounded* could be a force to be reckoned with and a sort of spiritual successor to Black Rock's explosion-loving game.

Vehicles zip along at a cracking pace, and the handling is as sensitive and responsive as that of any other *Ridge Racer*. Bugbear's influence on car handling shines through in the bouncy suspension and physics of the cars. Take a corner too hard and you'll find yourself on two wheels instead of four. Launch yourself at an awkward angle from a steep ramp and your front bumper will be eating tarmac for seconds at a time. "The point is to provide an environment for aggressive racing," Laakso explains, "and reward you for it." The setting, a fictional amalgam of Chicago and New York called Shadow Bay, is currently a far cry from the foreboding, dimly lit streets of



Culture crash

The mode we try out during our demo, entitled Crash Race, brings *FlatOut* to mind once more in that it's all about racking up points and staying within the top three qualifying positions. With the *FlatOut* licence now out of Bugbear's hands, *Unbounded* is the team's chance to showcase its talents on the massmarket, world stage. Whether we'll be gifted with new incarnations of *FlatOut*'s riotous stunt challenge modes is yet to be revealed, but Laakso tells us we can expect "surprises" as the game gears up for its launch next year.

The level and detail of the damage is breathtaking, even at this stage. Glittering shards of glass, crumpled steel and flaming wrecks fly by in the blink of an eye

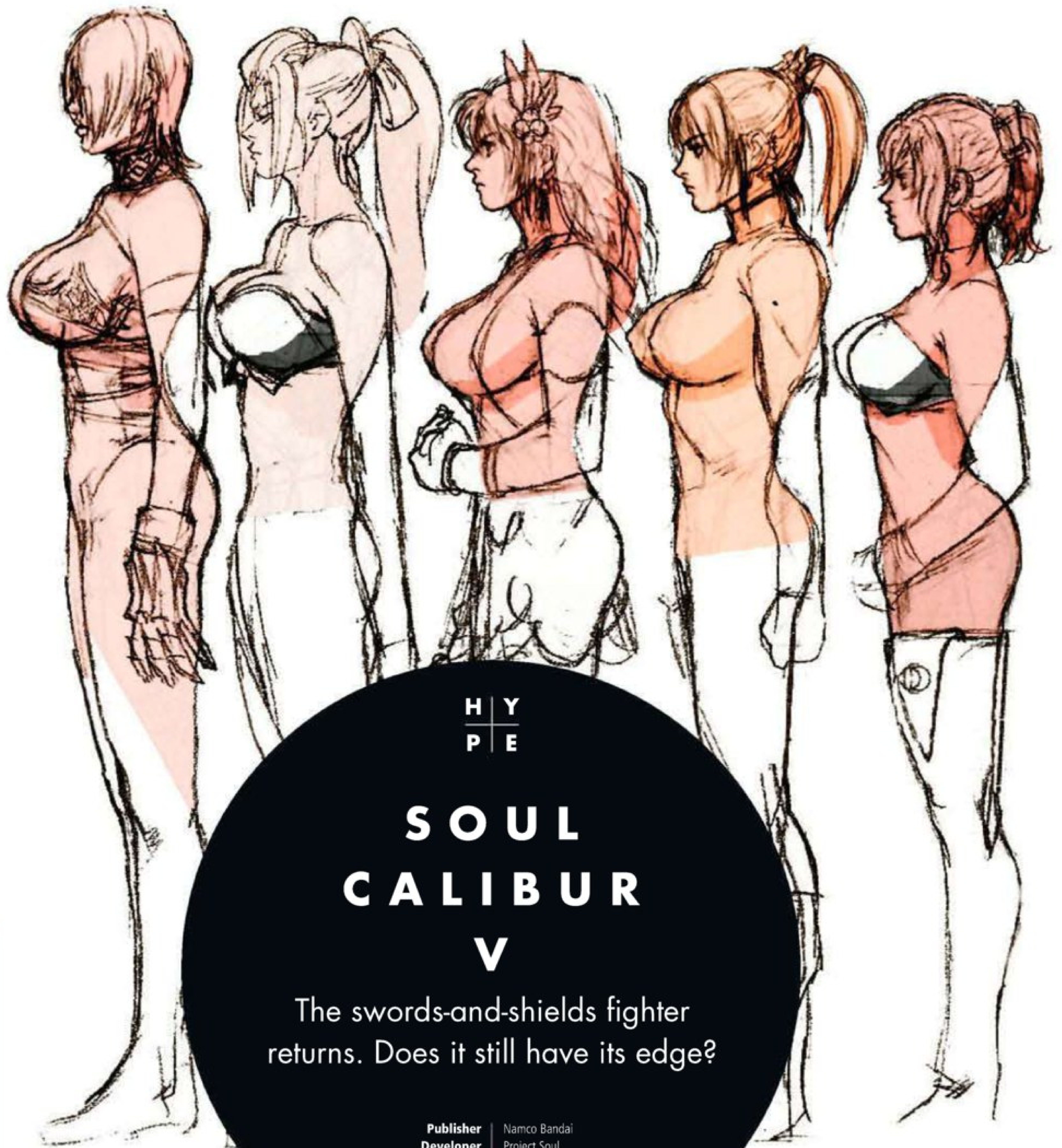


bit.ly/nxhVbi
Screenshot gallery

the announcement trailer. It's drenched in orange hues and beiges as sun flare blasts between the high-rises while you careen around the twisting, turning streets, capturing – if only for an instant – that melancholy, carefree sense of purist driving that defines the *Ridge Racer* brand. The proprietary engine looks capable, even at this stage, of handling all the assets Bugbear can throw at it, and while the game may lack the polish of a *Gran Turismo* or a *Need For Speed*, the rougher edges feel suitable rather than slapdash. Visually, and perhaps in genre categorisation, *Unbounded* feels like this generation's *Destruction Derby*.

The lack of boundaries referred to in the title, while a clear nod to the game's freedom from some of the core tenets of the franchise, refers to a street-racing gang of the same name that has its sights on tarmac domination. If it sounds dangerously like a dodgy narrative is creeping into the series, fear not: Laakso assures that the story "won't have any soap opera going on… there are no characters".

If there's an immovable object in the way of Bugbear's vision for *Unbounded*, it's likely to be lurking at retail rather than in its game design. The *Ridge Racer* brand has become something of a niche in the west, and it may be difficult for *Unbounded* to convert fans unfamiliar with the acquired taste of its drifting mechanics. It's nonetheless refreshing to find Namco taking a chance with one of its mainstay IPs, moving with the times while still trying to honour its heritage. With *Driver San Francisco* (reviewed on p112) trying something new this month too, the automobile revival shows no signs of stopping any time soon. And the genre is a better, more chaotic and unpredictable place for it. ■

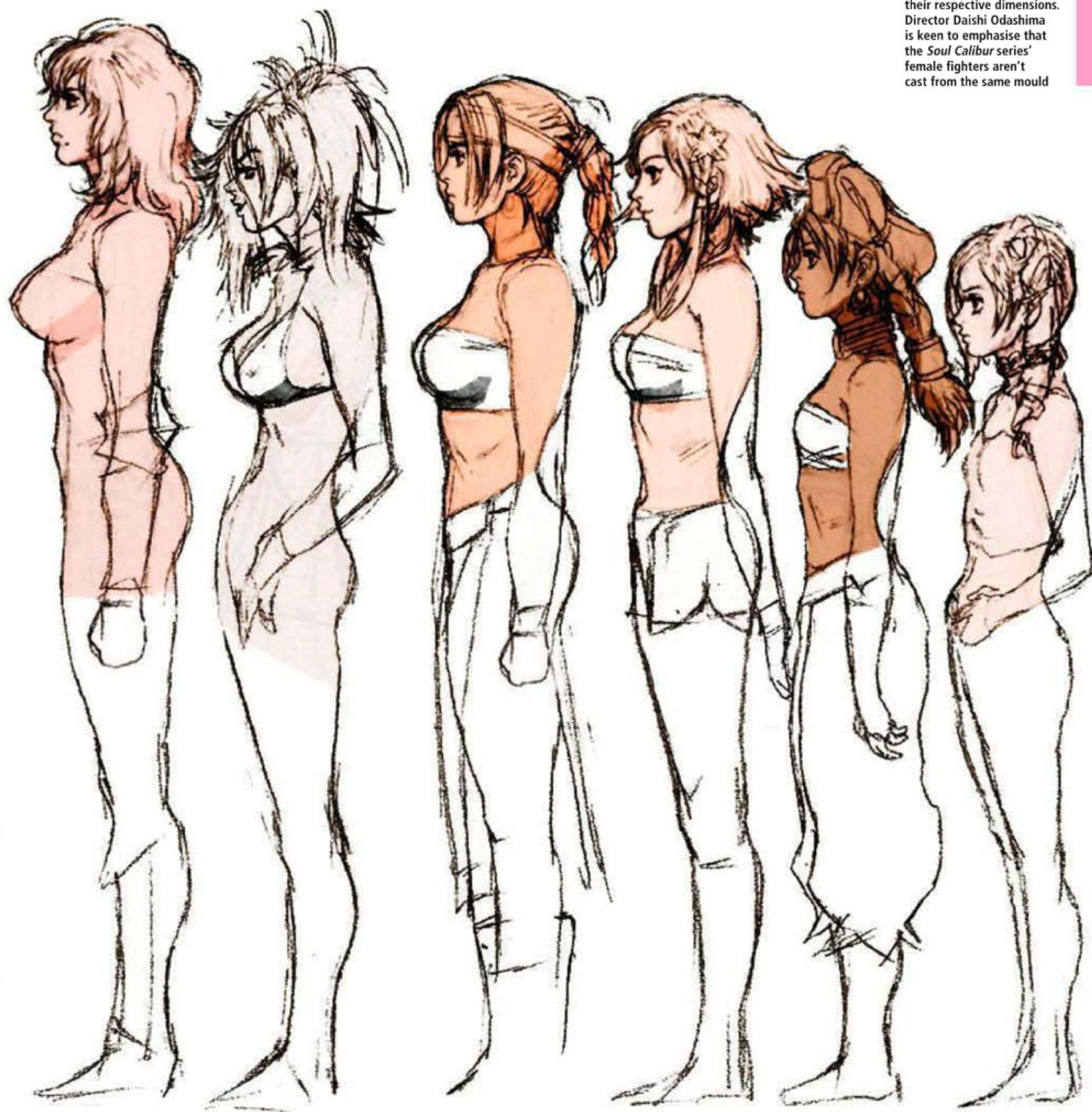


HYPE

SOUL CALIBUR V

The swords-and-shields fighter returns. Does it still have its edge?

Publisher	Namco Bandai
Developer	Project Soul
Format	PS3, 360
Origin	Japan
Release	2012



Ivy, Setsuka, Sophitia, Taki, Cassandra, Hilde, Tira, Seung Mina, Xianghua, Talim and Amy line up to illustrate their respective dimensions. Director Daishi Odashima is keen to emphasise that the *Soul Calibur* series' female fighters aren't cast from the same mould



SOUL CALIBUR V

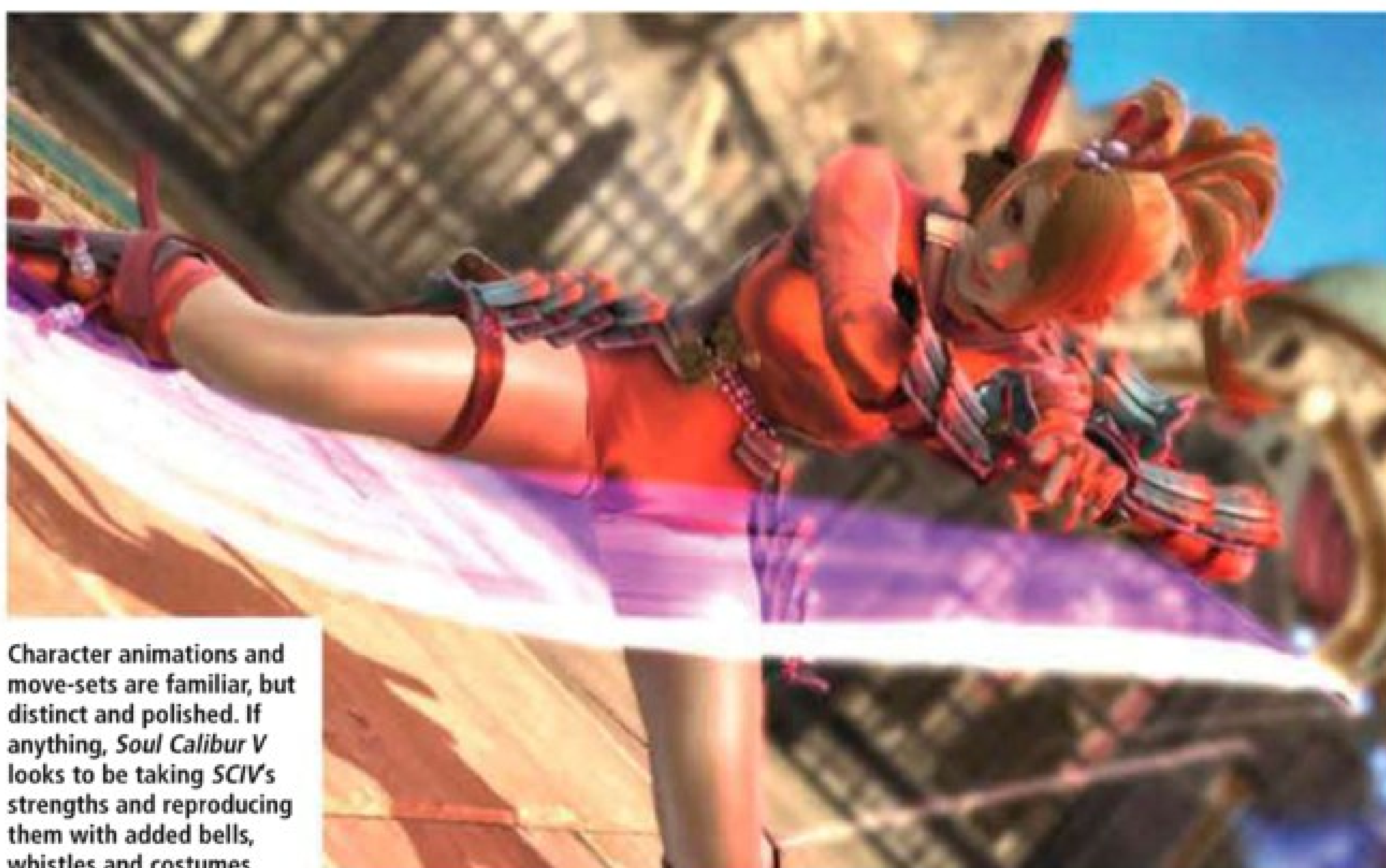


The stages shown thus far have been a mixture of the grim, grand and beautiful. In the more desolate stages the extravagant lighting effects – particularly striking during a clash of arms – are given the chance to shine

The mythology of *Soul Calibur* now has a grand, inspiring tale in the non-fiction realm: with the team at Project Soul disbanded following *Soul Calibur IV* in 2008, a fan-lead Facebook petition caught the attention of producer Katsuhiro Harada and here we are: a fifth title in the offing and a fanbase appeased. The core team at Namco's in-house studio has returned for the title that's set some 17 years after *SCIV*. The question is just what *Soul Calibur V* can do that its predecessor couldn't. If our strictly hands-off presentation is anything to go by, the answer is blunt: nothing.

Watching Ivy take on newcomer (and son of Sophitia) Patroclus aboard a floating wreck is almost indistinguishable from, say, Ivy taking on Sophitia aboard a floating wreck in *Soul Calibur IV*. It may partly be down to the protracted hardware generation that the game looks so familiar, but there's an unshakeable sense that Project Soul is playing it safe rather than stepping out of its comfort zone. It's not just a visual comparison that conjures the sense of déjà vu; the new characters revealed thus far are direct descendants – whether in the context of the narrative or their move-sets – of the original cast. Natsu, a student of Taki, is every bit the image of her master. With the exception of some inspired, zany and acrobatic specials (the best of which belong to Zwei's animal-conjuring antics), there doesn't appear to be anything but fan service inspiring the game's development.

The game looks familiar, and there's a sense that Project Soul is playing it safe



Character animations and move-sets are familiar, but distinct and polished. If anything, *Soul Calibur V* looks to be taking *SCIV*'s strengths and reproducing them with added bells, whistles and costumes

And perhaps that's the point. Salivating fans will no doubt find plenty to keep them going in the promised extensive character customisation options and returning online battles. But for everyone else *SCV* may be more expandalone than worthy purchase, and certainly appears to be far removed from anything as enticing as a fresh start.

Still, aping what's gone before isn't a disaster by any stretch, and *SCV* does have all the production strengths the series is known for. The backdrops are crisp, detailed and active without being too busy, while the rousing score is as over-the-top as ever.

The paradox of *Soul Calibur V*, then, is that it's intended as a clean break but seemingly treads the same ground as its forebears. A story set far in the mythology's future that won't forget its ancestors and traditions – a case of stunted growth, perhaps, rather than meaningful evolution. The coming year looks set to be an interesting one for Namco's core IP, with *Ridge Racer Unbounded* going boldly into the action racing scene while Project Soul stays true to its roots. Which one pays off most for Namco – which recent reports suggest has the leading share of boxed Japanese software revenues – the gamble or the safe bet, is an intriguing wager.



Still burning

It's been promised that both the Soul Edge and Soul Calibur swords will play a role in *Soul Calibur V* (in the narrative, at least), a further nod to the past for a series that began in 1996 with the arcade debut of *Soul Edge* and a *Ver II* a few months later to add new moves and characters and fix an over-difficult final boss. Since being ported as *Soul Blade* to PS1, Namco has steadily maintained the brand on home consoles and, with the exception perhaps of some uneven spin-offs in the form of *Legends* (Wii) and *Broken Destiny* (PSP), has managed to set the standard for swords-and-shields fighting games.

H | Y
P | E

AWESOMENAUTS

Ronimo brings Defense Of The Ancients to consoles with '80s cartoon flair

Publisher	DTP Entertainment
Developer	Ronimo Games
Format	360, PS3
Origin	The Netherlands
Release	Q3 2011



bit.ly/nfxjuA
Screenshot gallery



Environments are bright and attractive, with many incidental details such as reflective water. Stages also include features such as low gravity and lethal traps. While individually versatile, each character has a role to play and benefits from close collaboration. Yuri and Voltar make a formidable defensive pairing



AWESOMENAUTS

The past few years have set a strong precedent for multiplayer character designs that share the values of classic Saturday morning cartoons. Ronimo Games' *Awesomenauts* marks the consolidation of the two: a competitive online action game with the bearing of a toy franchise, from its vibrant roster to the gleaming synthesiser of its theme song.

Awesomenauts is a side-scrolling multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) – a variant of the action/strategy subgenre pioneered by *Warcraft III* mod *Defense Of The Ancients* and spinoffs such as *League Of Legends*. Two teams race to destroy the other's base while battling NPCs and static defences as well as one another. Characters have diverse special abilities, but fulfil fluid roles defined by skill progression rather than fixed classes.

As a hybrid of realtime strategy, roleplaying and tower defence, it's hardly surprising that the MOBA originated on PCs – but what is surprising is the relatively low number of games seeking to replicate that success on console. *Monday Night Combat* was the first, reinterpreting the genre as a thirdperson shooter. *Awesomenauts*, then, is a game with many sources but few obvious peers – 16bit platforming with modern online implementation and a deep competitive sensibility that feels, for all its novelty, very natural. "When we came up with the idea, we had to check – are we sure no one else is doing this?" says designer **Jasper Koning**.

> ***"When we came up with the idea, we had to check – is no one else doing this?"***

Matches are three-on-three and take place over large, multi-pathed environments. Despite the shift in perspective, characters fulfil similar roles to their isometric counterparts: ranged attackers, tanks, healers and support are all represented, albeit with vivid high concepts on proud display. Sheriff Lonestar, a gunman capable of lobbing dynamite and summoning a holographic bull, is about the most familiar space marine analogue on offer. The rest of the line-up includes Yuri, a jetpacking Russian monkey; Froggy G, an amphibian gangster with aquatic powers; Voltar, a brain in a jar that summons helpful droids; Clunk, an exploding German robot that bites enemies to regain health; and Leon, a French assassin who, as a chameleon, has the power to become invisible and create a doppelgänger of himself.

Each is lovingly presented, with a charm that pays tribute to the cartoons that inspired them, but Ronimo doesn't seem to have a huge interest in parody. Koning explains: "We have a general enthusiasm for that whole style of animation – nostalgia for our childhoods, and all that. We figured that we wouldn't be the only ones who felt that way."

Characters are profoundly different to play, too, both in terms of ability and in the way they navigate the world. Whereas Yuri flies, Froggy G charge-jumps and Voltar hovers – inconsistencies that sometimes challenge *Awesomenauts'* accessibility. Playing a match with each of the six, we found ourselves learning and re-learning the game as we went, favouring some characters at the expense of others. Getting under the skin of a character is an undoubtedly satisfying experience, however, and results in personal attachments that bode well for the game as a whole. Chaining together Froggy G's dash attack and high jump allows for a hit-and-run strategy that the enemy can do little about, while Yuri's time-distorting forcefield can be upgraded with a healing property that allows him to defend allies single-handed. From the little we've seen of the abilities and upgrades on offer, there's potential for hundreds of such combinations, and it'll be interesting to see what players come up with on release.

Ronimo promises an extensive programme of post-launch support, with additional characters to come and the potential for extra maps farther down the line. There's full bot support and threeplayer splitscreen, but no dedicated singleplayer: *Awesomenauts* will rely on establishing a dedicated audience to keep players interested. If the game is met with the same enthusiasm as *DOTA*, however, the future's bright indeed – and perhaps this toy-franchise-that-never-was could become a toy-franchise-that-is after all. ■

Q&A
Jasper Koning
Game designer, Romino



This is the second time you've adapted a traditionally PC experience for console. Why have you chosen this route?
Swords & Soldiers was our attempt to bring *StarCraft* to consoles, and this game is our attempt to bring *DOTA* to consoles – but it wasn't ever that conscious. There were a few games we saw that did side-scrolling strategy stuff, and we thought that there was a lot more to get from it – a lot of low-hanging fruit, gameplay wise. We took *StarCraft* as a starting-off point and tried to squeeze as much as we could into a side-scrolling mould. Now we're trying to do the same thing with *DOTA*.

What's the appeal of 2D platforming?
It gets picked up very broadly by a lot of players, and that's what we intended for it. Our goal is to have it be more pick-up-and-play than *League Of Legends*. It has to be – it's being released on console, and nobody takes any crap on console regarding usability.

How do you go about explaining the core concepts of *DOTA* to a console audience that doesn't necessarily have a precedent for it?
We did a lot of user testing, and I think we're pretty close – I don't dare say we've nailed it, but there are a few core concepts that are very important to convey in the tutorial. Like not dying, being scared of turrets and not running blindly into them. The main problem is that if you don't know what you're doing you're destroying the fun of your teammates and maybe even the enemy if they don't have a challenge. The demands on players are pretty high, but as long as we can teach them to stay safe then that's the most important thing.

Is there anything else you'd like to fix about *DOTA*?
The way the store works. In *League Of Legends* and *DOTA* you have a character who gains experience, and levelling up lets you make little choices about skills. Then there's currency, which allows you to improve your stats and maybe skills as well. I think that the way we merge the two is really nice and elegant. We have one currency, so that means we can drop players in and out because we can give them the same amount of money that their teammates have. The number next to your name is the amount of gold you've gathered divided by 100 – so it's more of a strength indicator than a level, but it works for people who don't know *League Of Legends* as well as people who do. I'm pretty happy with how that turned out.



Ubisoft has released very few side-on screens, as though it's ashamed the game is largely a 2.5D platformer. It shouldn't be, not least because cutaway buildings better evoke the comic's panels and gutters than the full 3D sections

THE ADVENTURES OF TINTIN

Can Hergé's sleuth survive two tiers of adaptation to come up trumps?

Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	Ubisoft Montpellier
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	France
Release	October



bit.ly/qwiZXS
Screenshot gallery





THE ADVENTURES OF TINTIN

Although the game lacks the crisp, solid linework that typifies Hergé's drawings, the animation manages to capture the exaggerated poses of his characters in action, and the palette also deftly matches the original's flat colours – distinctively placid at a time when most comics opted for garish



Having witnessed one pillar of our childhood crumble beneath the fumbling hands of Michael Bay, the prospect of a big-screen adaptation of Tintin (in 3D, no less) fills us with trepidation. Early trailers make it look worryingly more like a thirdperson cover shooter than a tale of adventure and intrigue unravelled by a plucky journalist and his dog. What hope is there, then, for the game of the film of the comic? More than you might think, judging by our recent hands-on with Ubisoft's tie-in, which recasts the action of its cinematic sibling as a 2.5D platform-puzzler of taut control and understated ingenuity.

You might wonder whether this is the perfect fit for Hergé's young sleuth, who might have indulged in the odd bit of swashbuckling, but was rarely to be seen wall-jumping like the Prince of Persia. But that thought soon evaporates in admiration at how

The animation and sense of caricature match the tone and tangible form of Hergé's style



closely the animation and sense of caricature matches the rambunctious tone and tangible form of Hergé's *ligne claire* style. Bonk a patrolling sailor on the head and he flops to the floor, legs and rump protruding into the air, stars whistling round his head. And such an end is achieved by typically Tintin means: straight-up fisticuffs are rarely the reporter's first resort, but upon locating a group of enemies, we're able to hurl what looks to be a bed pan at one of their heads, causing the targeted villain to swing out blindly and clock his two companions.

The levels from the singleplayer campaign we see take place on a ship, with Tintin descending through its decks and avoiding the salty sea dogs who might hinder his investigation. The format is a series of single-screen puzzles, in which Tintin circumvents his foes either by knocking them out with projectiles or unleashing physics traps – cutting the rope to a heavy sack hanging above a pair of sailors, for example, or rolling an oil barrel across the deck to take out threats *Donkey Kong*-style.

Should Tintin find himself in close quarters, however, a few blows will soften an enemy up, and he's then able to grab them by the collar and hurl them back into other sentries. Not all enemies can be thwarted hand-to-hand, forcing smarter tactics. A boss fight sees the camera pull back to reveal our antagonist, the ship's captain, Alan, firing a flare gun from a vantage point down on to the 2.5D scene. Tintin must dart around the stage, luring Alan into shooting a flare into boxes of fireworks, which explodes, sending spiralling projectiles toward the screen. If enough of the fireworks find their target, a slightly singed Alan eventually jumps down into the level to finish the job by hand. Tintin then uses that most Hergé-esque of weapons to vanquish his opponent: the banana peel.

Shortly afterwards Tintin, now accompanied by the irascible Haddock, flees a torrent of water as it surges through the ship – the plane of action flipping so that Tintin runs toward the camera, hurdling obstacles as they zoom from the foreground to the back. When the action returns to 2.5D, the level rotates with the sinking ship, turning ladders into monkey-bars, and culminating in a tricky platforming challenge as Tintin tries to stay above the waterline, bounding between crates which float up the now vertical cargo hold.

Our demo may have been cut for display purposes, but this shows a remarkable density of ideas. If it can keep up the pace and variety of its smarts and slapstick, then even if the film soils our nostalgia, the game looks to offer welcome refuge. ■



Concussion campaign

On the evidence of the barmy co-op mode, it would seem the devs have more ideas than they know how to fit into the Tintin theme. So they step away from Hergé and enter a dreamworld – one experienced by Captain Haddock while unconscious, in fact. Levels form and reform according to no real-world logic, while doorways link entirely disconnected areas. Characters even mop up coins like Sonic and, by passing through portals, can turn into Snowy. The sequence ends with the two characters jumping into a giant clock – all very odd, but testament to the robust and intriguing platform-puzzle mechanics that lie beneath.

Super-zombies appear occasionally. The Ram walks slowly, but takes a lot of damage. The best approach is to lure him close to explosives before hurling whatever's in your hand to detonate them



BELOW Any item can be thrown. In some cases, this makes them more powerful: knives, cleavers and axes do extra damage if hurled. For other items, like the hatstand, it can be a less effective tactic





Once the zombies are within chewing range, they're more of a threat. You quickly adopt a relentless backpedal in combat situations, slashing away at thin air with your weapons



HYPE

DEAD ISLAND

Techland's holiday from hell doesn't look like the brochure

Publisher	Deep Silver
Developer	Techland
Format	PS3, 360, PC
Origin	Poland
Release	September 9



bit.ly/ptwckV
Screenshot gallery

You'll come to treasure your best weapons. But *Dead Island* forces constant scavenging – a wrench or sickle discovered in a tight spot can be just as useful as your well-oiled AK47

The inveterate rummager will find a callback to *Dead Island*'s much-discussed CGI trailer ten minutes into the game. A man and a woman lie, dead and chewed, on the floor with a fire axe between them. In the trailer, they're real people. In the game, they're just another pair of corpses. Making a game as thoughtful and composed as that trailer seems to have been beyond the reach of developer Techland and, as a result, *Dead Island* isn't quite sure of its tone.

It's by turns fatuous and frightening: the game's opening cinematic is an airy, firstperson view of a drunken night in Banoi, studded with warnings of a zombie hangover. It's silly and sweary, and serves as an introduction to the cast of four playable clichés – including a hyper-macho Texan quarterback laid low by injury and a bling-mad rapper. It suggests a schlocky take on zombie horror, where your enemies are hilarious shambling meat-sacks.

But the undead's first real appearance is genuinely affecting. Asked to find a maintenance cupboard by a friendly voice on the radio, you find yourself facing a corridor full of monsters. To survive, you have to turn tail and sprint. Look back and you're food. It's closer to the poignant, life-threatening take on the mythos suggested by the trailer.

Survive that, and the game swings back again, abandoning subtlety and drawing itself with wide brushstrokes. It seems you're immune to zombification, and you come to in a beachside safe house crowded with the moaning survivors of the infestation's first wave. Outside, the survivors' de facto leader, and your first quest-giver, is battling a handful of the horde. He needs help, but your safe-house chums are too busy contemplating their own imminent putrefaction to step in. Luckily, there's a kayak paddle by the door.

Like much of the game, *Dead Island*'s combat is a touch clumsy – but in this case it feels like a deliberate decision. In the early stages, fights are close-range affairs: swinging a four-foot length of wood feels as unwieldy as you'd expect. Players have a stamina gauge that determines how they can fight: take a broomstick as your primary weapon and each swing drains it quickly; with a carving knife you can stab for minutes without stopping.

Dead Island's zombies are too quick to make on-the-spot strategising much of a possibility. Locational damage means putting your crosshair over a rotting head before commencing your swing will likely pop it straight off the neck, but most fights start and end with the player backpedaling frantically.

But fights feel weighty – connect wood with flesh and you're rewarded with a hefty thump and an arc of claret – and the constant reliance on scouring your surroundings for lethal toys ties missions to the game world. Those missions are doled out as in an RPG, and players will have several in progress at any given time. As you begin to understand the resort's layout, you'll be able to complete and cash in two or more of these at a time, and plot a route around the game's safe areas and workbenches (see 'Bench press').

Early quests are largely simple: go here to press A on a thing, then come back for a pat on the head and an XP bonus. That XP feeds a levelling system that yields access to new skills chosen by the player, adding an extra level of customisation above character choice.

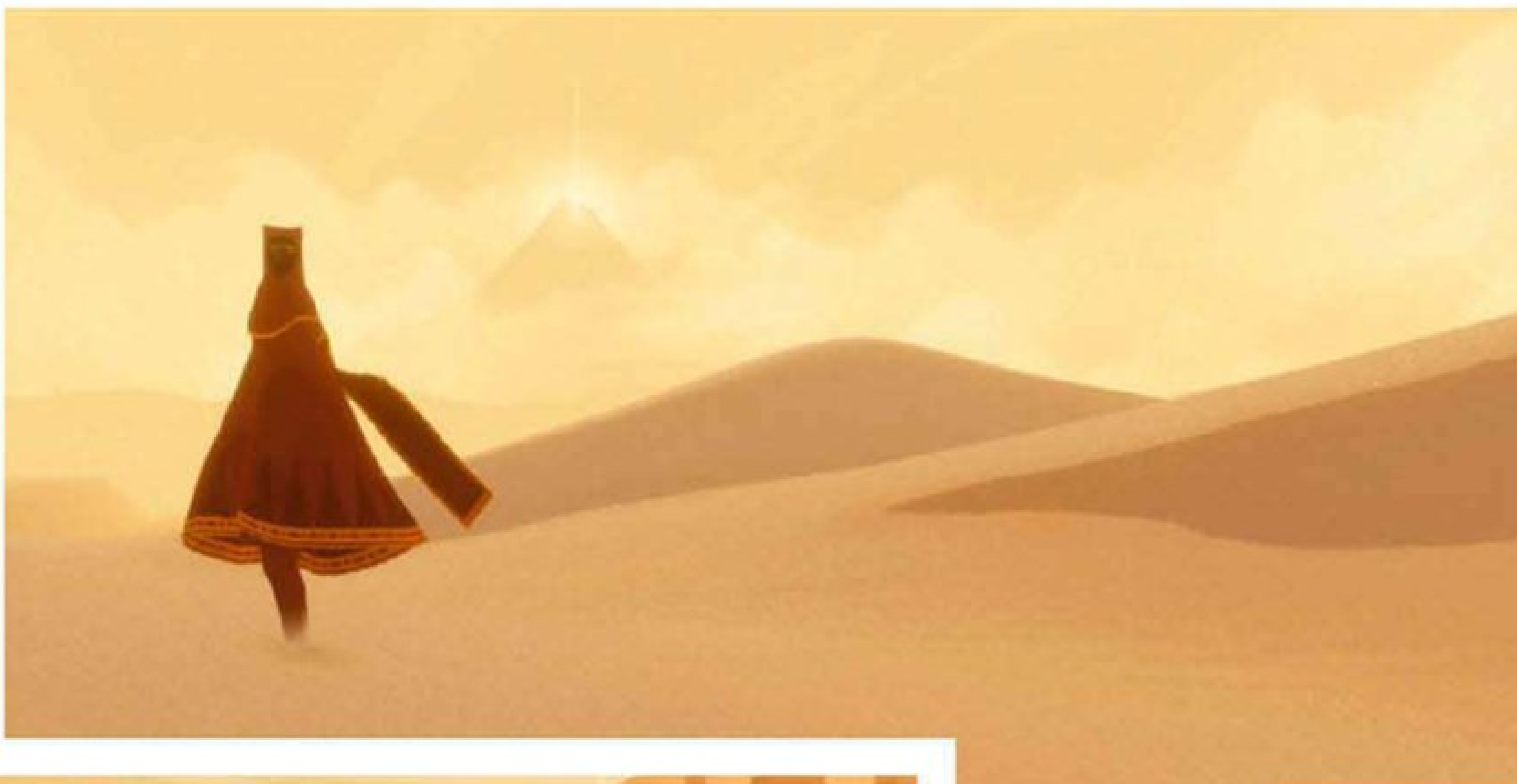
Dead Island feels like its antagonists: ragged and not quite fresh. But, like the zombies, it has the potential – thanks to a crunchy, satisfying combat system and open game world – to sink its teeth in and not let go until you've come over to its side. ■



Bench press

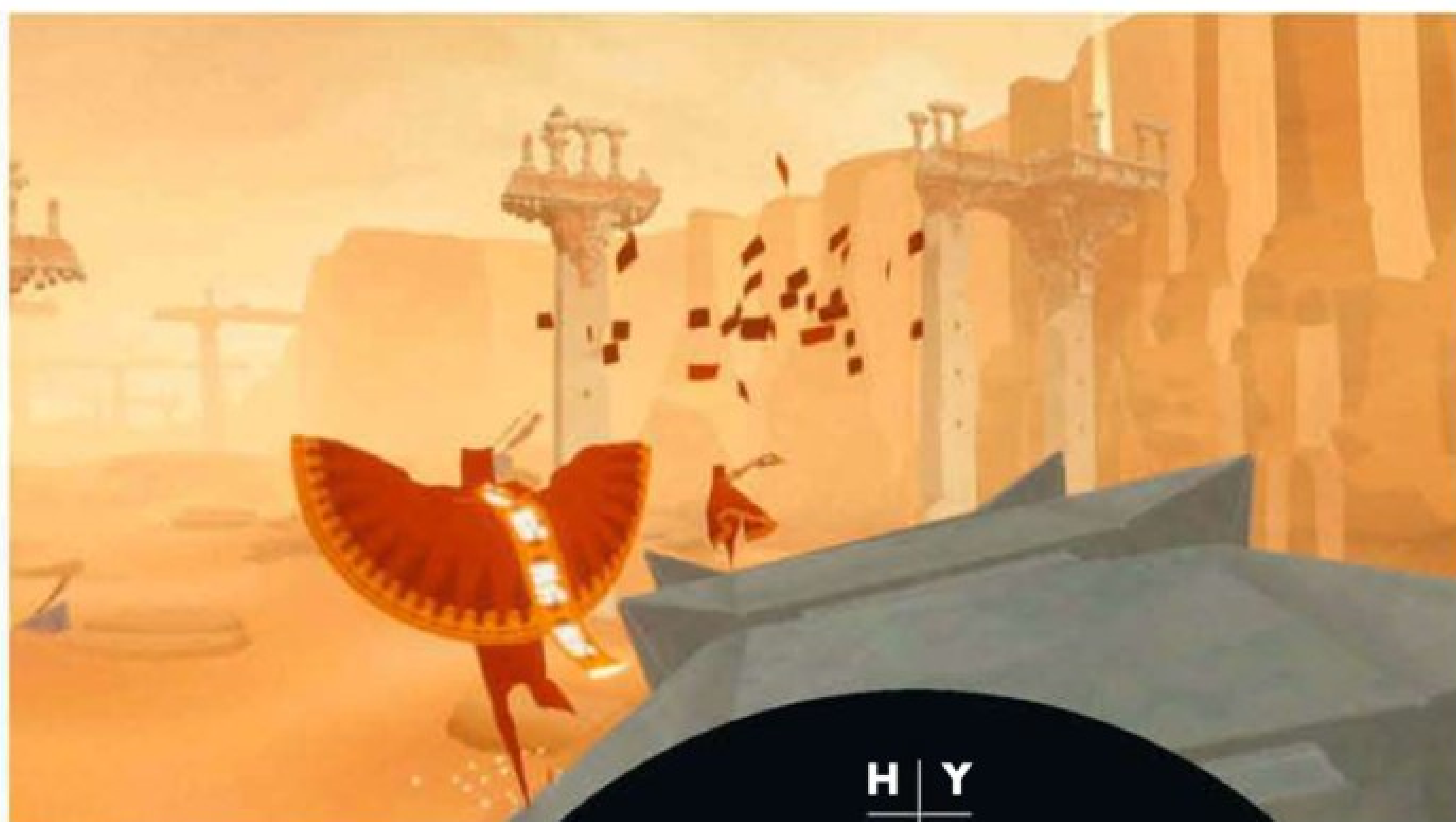
Complete a mission for a survivor and they might hand you a weapon. Generic items – wrenches, knives, paddles – come in varying conditions. Use a weapon too much and it'll break, requiring repair, but do a job and the implement you receive will almost certainly be of a higher quality.

For bigger missions, you might get recipes for combination weapons. These are put together at workbenches, and generally last longer and kill faster than their vanilla components. An early example is a spiked bat – made by combining nails and a plank – that removes heads with one quick swing.



BELOW **The sand is a dynamic height map subject to a fluid simulation, so that wind in the environment pushes the fluid, as does the movement of your character across it**

"The character went through a whole lot of iteration," Nava says. "We started with a very humanoid character; it had eyes and arms and hands"





There's more of an explicit narrative in *Journey* than in *Flower*. But, Clark says, "the point of *Journey* isn't to deliver a story; it's to provide a context for your experience"

H Y P E

JOURNEY

Thatgamecompany's enigmatic desert quest beckons us into its beta

Publisher	Sony
Developer	thatgamecompany
Format	PS3
Origin	US
Release	October





bit.ly/omjpkm
Concept art gallery

In some respects, *Journey* couldn't be more distant from thatgamecompany's previous offering, *Flower* – a lyrical plaything in which you investigated the soaring dreams of a houseplant. Verdant pastures have been exchanged for horizons of hot sands. Civilisation has been transformed from a dubious encroaching force to a mysterious relic. The player has evolved from the extremes of ethereality to a stylised character. It possesses eyes and legs, but is otherwise an elegantly simplified sketch of red cloth. And now there are two of you – *Journey* marks thatgamecompany's first foray into the cooperative space, albeit one that discards normal notions of what that entails; neither friend lists nor voice chat will be found here.

Sink yourself into *Journey*'s brief but mesmerising beta, however, and you'll find a clear thread of DNA. Like *Flower*, it's loosely a puzzle game, but one that never seeks to confound: instead, the objectives simply unfold before you as you toy with it, gently probing the environment through intuitive exploration. This is the anti-*Portal*.

Although some early press misconstrued *Journey*'s desert for an open-world experience like *The Endless Forest*, it's structured like many more conventional puzzlers, comprising a linear sequence of enclosed spaces. Yet with their vague objectives, it feels inappropriate to brand them levels; the requirements for progression are obliquely, playfully presented, but the degree of raw challenge is barely existent. Just by being in the environment, you'll begin to intuit the ways that you can affect it through movement and sound – and simple though they are, these discoveries are the game's delight.

"We avoid puzzles whose only purpose is to provide a puzzle to the player," says lead designer **Nick Clark**. "The experience is more exploratory. It's about being about in the environment, discovering things for yourself, and not getting stuck – that's important to us."

Matt Nava, lead artist on *Flower* and *Journey*, elaborates: "A lot of what we think about when we design a space is how it makes you feel – what are the colours, the scale? A hard puzzle can break that mood and put you in a frustrated state, or detract from the atmosphere. That's something we think about a lot: does it take you out of the moment?"

It's for the same reason that avenues of communication and interaction between players are limited. *Journey*'s atmosphere would be quickly dispelled by the shrill tones of a 12-year-old questioning your sexuality; it would be equally tough to commit if you knew your partner as a real-world friend. So the game throws together strangers who can do little more than sing wordless, haunting notes.

Requirements for progression are playfully presented, the raw challenge barely existent

"We experimented with a lot more explicit multiplayer mechanics," Clark says, "but it shifted the focus away from the more fleeting interaction where you're just genuinely happy to see someone and have them on your journey. So we backed away from that. There are certain things players can do for each other – and that varies from level to level – but that's part of the mystery of the game."

Whereas *Flower* relied on colour and composition alone to instil moods in the player, *Journey* introduces images that are assuredly totemic. There's a vast mountain in the distance, a beam from its summit reaching into the sky; the dunes stretching away beneath, dwarfing the traveller; an implied history to the world. Rarely has desolation seemed so captivating.

"We had the concept of sand there from the very beginning," Clark says. "We started with the feeling we wanted between players in a multiplayer space, and we started with the desert journeying to a mountain."

The two ideas have more in common than you might think, as Nava explains: "One thing that we were thinking about was making an environment that really made you focus on the characters and made you want to be with someone else. So we theorised that a really desolate landscape would draw your attention toward the one living thing in the scene."

The colours used in *Journey*, too, contrast with *Flower*. It opens with your russet-red character struggling up a dune. As the figure reaches the summit, the camera peels back to reveal a landscape of oranges, yellows and salmon pinks, the mountain's silhouette puncturing the horizon. Later, the sky becomes a pale turquoise, the sands a rosy hue. Later still, as you stand awed beneath a vast half-buried mechanism, the sky bruises to a gloomy, smoggy green.

"We start with a map of the experience and make a chart of the colours over the course of the game," Nava says. "At the beginning of the project I designed that colour spectrum to match the emotional arc we wanted to portray. So we use a lot of bold colours – golds and reds and oranges. But we also wanted to have a magical otherworldly feel, so we do use very impressionistic colours at certain points in the game."

Gamers may be better used to magic and otherwordliness than to investing themselves in the pastoral longings of plantlife, but that makes *Journey* no less bold a game. It's still one that rejects challenge, or explicit game mechanics, and in its manipulation of multiplayer attempts to evoke not cooperation but a far more subtle emotion – companionship. A fantasy world may be the most conventional of thatgamecompany's chosen settings to date, but with *Journey* it's still very much walking its own path. ■



Zigzaggurat

"At the beginning of the project I was looking at a lot of Romanesque architecture," Nava says when we ask about the origins of *Journey*'s architecture. "But Romanesque arches are very smooth – and [due to limitations of the engine] we had to simplify them. So I looked at various rug design patterns – as they're grid-based woven patterns, it's very hard to do curves, so they have a lot of stair-steppy design. *Journey* also references Moroccan architecture, the Alhambra [a 14th-century Moorish fortress in Spain], Islamic buildings – but it's really a mix of various things from the ancient world."

H Y
P E

DEAD RISING 2:

OFF THE RECORD

If you're glad, we'll be Frank

Publisher	Capcom
Developer	Capcom Vancouver
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Canada
Release	October 14







One of *Dead Rising 2*'s key features, combo weapons, returns with new options. Though inventive, collecting and assembling them is boring – but the massive PP boosts force you to use them or be underpowered



There are bikes dotted around Fortune City that can be used from the off – unlike the tempting but unlockable sports cars. It's a hoot ploughing through zombies with such power, sending ragdolls and limbs spinning – and even better when you get chainsaws fitted on the handlebars



bit.ly/onm6IH
Screenshot gallery

One area in which *OTR* excels is costumes: in our rather haphazard time in Fortune City, we dressed as everything from Ulala to a pro wrestler. This early build's blood spatter effects are comically overdone

Be careful what you wish for. In the case of *Dead Rising*'s fans that would be Frank West, the original game's chunky brute, who was sidelined for *Dead Rising 2* amid much Internet wailing and gnashing of teeth. His replacement, Chuck Greene, was serviceable but not nearly charming enough. And even post-release DLC that returned Frank to a starring role didn't fill the hole.

Dead Rising 2: Off The Record is a... a what? A remake? A director's cut? More than any of these, it's a game that we all played last September, now with West instead of Greene in the lead role. *Off The Record* seems somehow akin to OJ Simpson's notorious If I Did It, but we digress – who knew character was so important to zombie slaughterfests?

And it really must be, because in Adventure mode *OTR* has little to distinguish it from *Dead Rising 2*: though the opening's slightly tweaked, and obviously the cutscenes have been re-done with West, this plays out (for its first few hours, at least) exactly as *DR2* did. Even *DR2*'s central MacGuffin, which had Greene searching out the rare Zombrex medicine to keep his daughter alive with one dose every 24 hours, has been kept through the convenience of West himself being infected – so now he needs Zombrex. Barring some new combo weapons, we came across the same survivors in the same places as when we did it all with Greene. So what's new?

West's a big presence, literally. He's fatter these days, with sizeable haunches that are a nice change from the immaculately curved rears of every other thirdperson avatar, and learns different moves when levelling up. The best feature he brings is the return of the photojournalist's camera, sorely missed in *DR2*, and the scoring system operates on the same principles as in *Dead Rising*. The points for each picture are totted up in a similar fashion to the first game, but the quickfire circles around points of interest here are clearer and the numbers stack up faster than they ever did before: some decent crowd shots was all it took to boost us up a couple of levels in the early game.

Outside of West, *OTR*'s main selling point is the new Sandbox mode. This sets you loose in Fortune City without any of the bothersome story cues, takes out all the survivors, and dots challenges around each location – the latter have time limits, and involve things like killing a certain number of zombies, getting from A to B as quickly as possible, or fetching certain kinds of item.

Perhaps it's because the locations are all so familiar, but Sandbox mode feels underwhelming. The challenges unlock in a linear fashion depending on how many zombies you've killed, Psychos are more plentiful (see 'Psycho no-no'), and there's certainly no shortage of the undead or tools to deal with them, but without the insistent tug of your watch or the need to ferry survivors around, West feels a little lost.

That said, *Dead Rising 2* was never the most subtle of games and *OTR* is fundamentally the same experience, meaning that if killing ludicrous numbers of zombies in comical ways is your thing, this does the job in style. But the goodwill anyone naturally has towards the bonkers premise is diluted by the simple fact that it's so familiar. If you've already played *Dead Rising 2*, a decent but hardly outstanding title, there seems little point in buying and replaying it so soon for the sake of a character skin and what amounts to a half-baked high-score mode. And if this isn't for the fans, then who? So be careful what you wish for – because you just might get it. ■



Psycho no-no

Though the 'psycho' bosses are responsible for many of *Dead Rising*'s most memorable moments, this has everything to do with the cutscenes rather than how the fights play. There are few games with boss fights as absolutely terrible as *Dead Rising* and its sequel, and *OTR* does nothing to rectify this – they're still attritional wars against overpowered characters that ignore the fact you're smacking them with a broadsword and uppercut West to the floor. The total lack of progress from the first game is bewildering: the series seems to wear these encounters as some perverse badge of pride.

this is vita.



Vita. Latin for 'life'. But what will it mean for yours? Over the following pages we take a look at what Sony's powerful new handheld console is all about. We talk to SCE worldwide studios president **Shuhei Yoshida** and SCEE's newly appointed president **Jim Ryan** about the console's influences, the strategy driving it, and its potential to trump Wii U before Nintendo's hardware even hits the high street.

We also go hands-on with a selection of the platform's first-wave offerings before delving deep into the Sony machine to find out what **Studio Liverpool** has been up to since Vita devkits turned up in its offices (we'll give you a clue: it goes fast and has a penchant for electronic beats).

In another wing of Sony's facility, we pay a visit to SCE's little-known **XDev** teams, which are currently working on the frontline of Vita research and development. And, finally, we talk to Queasy Games' **Jonathan Mak** about his latest project, *Sound Shapes*, along with co-designer **Shaw-Han Liem**, and find out how Vita can be as much portable musical instrument as game-playing device.

We'll consider where Vita came from, what it means for Sony's family of devices, and ultimately why you should care. The hardware may be some months away from western release, but over the course of the next 16 pages you'll gain a clearer idea of whether or not Sony is about to introduce a portable entertainment life worth living.

smart fun.

THE MEN TAKING CHARGE OF SONY'S NEXT CONSOLE DISCUSS ITS CREATION – AND FUTURE

We may look back on 2011 as the year of Vita – the rumours, the reveal, the Japanese launch – but it's a journey that Sony began some years earlier. "Since Kaz Hirai took over as Sony Computer Entertainment president and CEO [in 2006], he instructed SCE's hardware group to work closely with Worldwide Studios' creative and tech talents to develop future PlayStation platforms," says SCE Worldwide Studios (WWS) president **Shuhei Yoshida**. "PS Move was the first platform project developed in such a way, followed by PS Vita. Before PS Move and PS Vita, new platform development was exclusively driven by HW [hardware] group's inspiration and innovation. Ever since early 2008, when the final CPU and GPU were being decided for PS Vita, WWS talents were deployed to give feedback, come up with ideas and concepts, prototypes and actual development of some parts of the PS Vita dev environment. It has been a close collaborative effort among SCEI HW group, SCE's global R&D teams and WWS teams."

With so many departments involved, it's perhaps unsurprising that Vita includes such a broad array of features. Sony's clearly picked up a few lessons since its previous handheld platform, PSP, made its debut in 2004. "The research which was done [for Vita]," says SCEE's new president and CEO **Jim Ryan**, "was not by any means just looking backwards at the experiences we had on PSP and are currently enjoying on PS3; it was far more future facing, looking at current and prospective handheld entertainment trends."

When you first switch on Vita, the influence of such trends is evident. Games are collected in bubbles (moveable, circular app icons), and you can hop in and out of titles with ease. Tired of biting the dust in *Wipeout*? Hop out and jump into something else instead. The



Vita's bubble-based, touchscreen-controlled user interface, dubbed LiveArea, has echoes of iOS

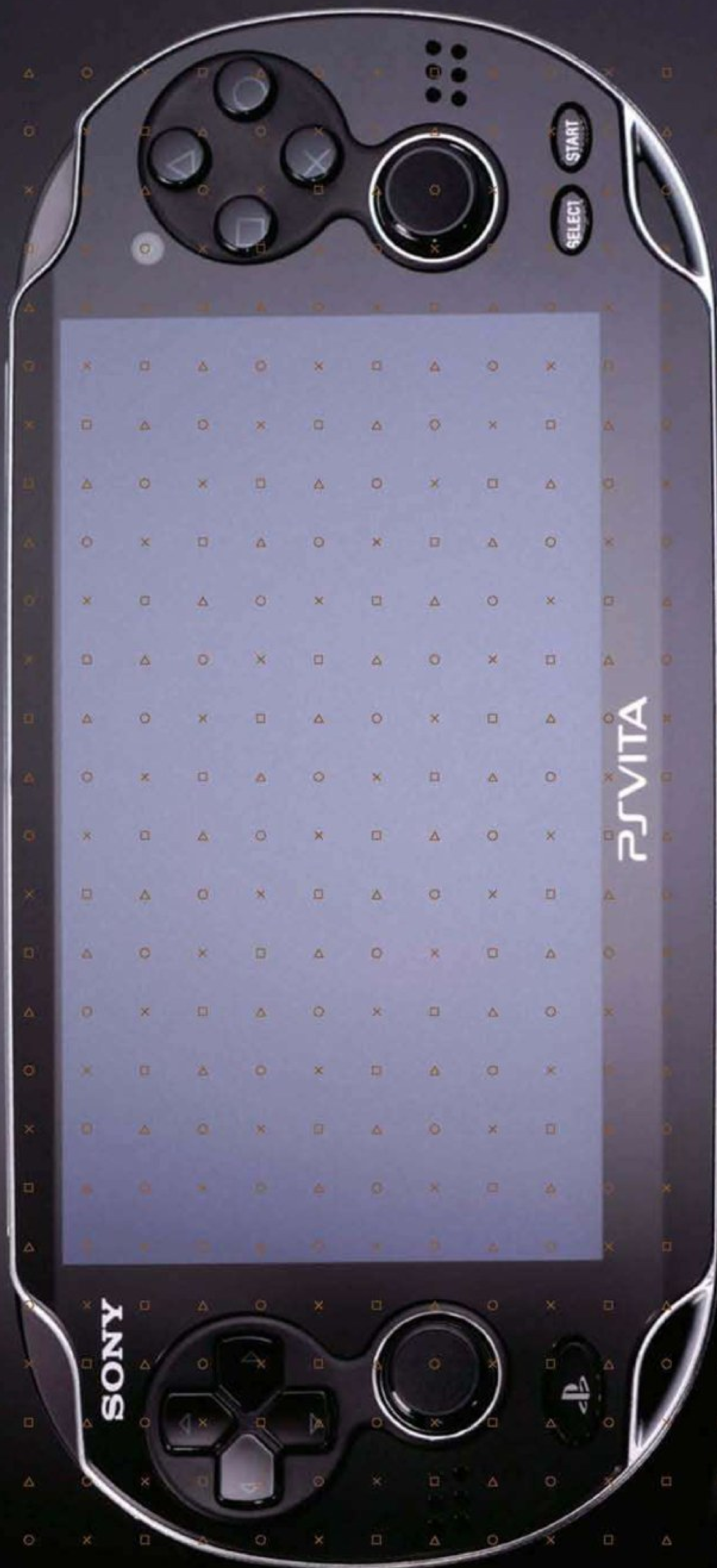


Jim Ryan, the newly installed president and CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe

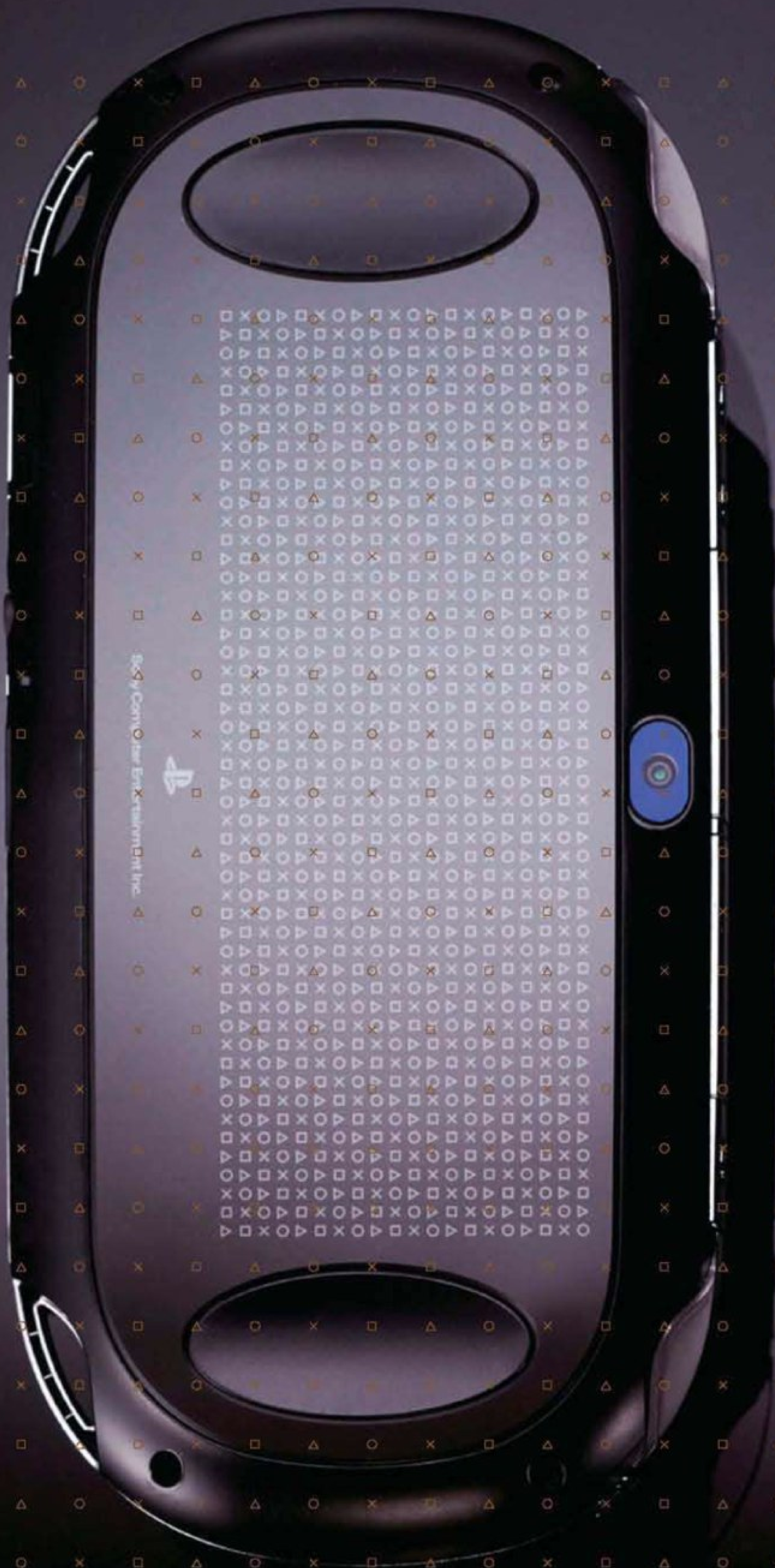
dashboard also bears a striking similarity to the frontend of an iOS device. Has SCE decided to follow Apple's lead, opening the gates to impulse-buy, super-low price apps, too? "I think there are lots of places for consumers to enjoy that sort of content; Vita is positioned at a slightly different market – the high-end gaming experience," Ryan says. "Vita has been publicly positioned as the ultimate portable gaming experience. There are obviously going to be games on Vita which are going to reflect that quality level. Equally, at the other end of the spectrum, we've had success with PlayStation Minis across a variety of platforms – so [Vita will deliver] a little bit of everything."

The phrase "a little bit of everything" could easily apply to the Vita hardware itself, with front touchscreen, rear trackpad, front- and rear-facing cameras and tilt controls all in the mix. Its rear trackpad remains the least known quantity, and Sony approached the feature with understandable caution, as Yoshida explains: "When SCEI's HW group suggested that they could put a touchpad behind PS Vita's screen, we were somewhat sceptical how it could be useful to games." It was Bigbig Studios' *Little Deviants* that swung the vote, but the trackpad was just one aspect of the endeavour that from the beginning, we're told, had a $250 pricepoint in its sights. "There was always a desire to have a really aggressive pricepoint and not to have to launch the thing at four or five hundred dollars or euros," Ryan reveals.

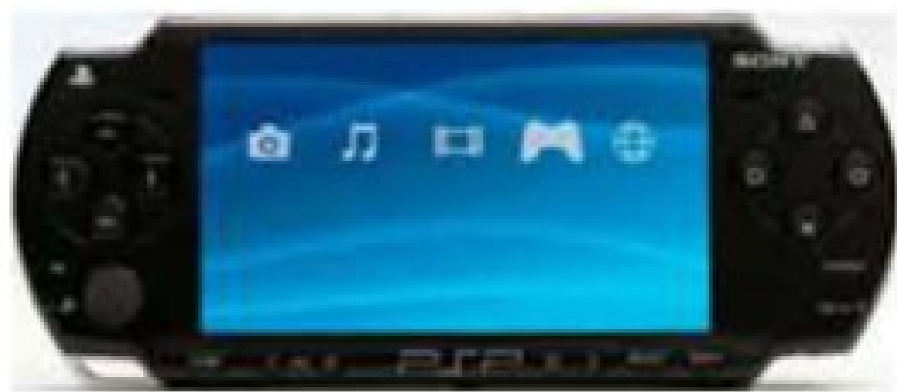
"$250 [£155], or €250 [£220], has always been our target price to hit for PS Vita, since the beginning of the development of the platform in 2008," Yoshida asserts. "We did not price PS Vita to match 3DS. Consumers have to see the value to shell out their hard-earned money, so each product must have the right price to meet the consumers' perception of the value proposition of each

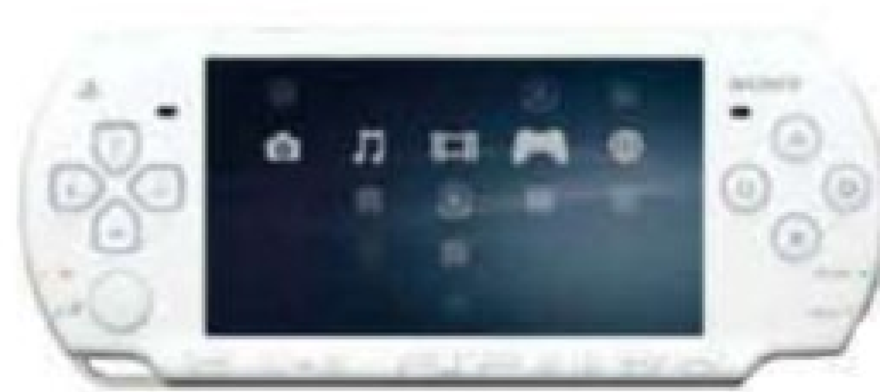


While Vita's form factor recalls that of PSP, it's slicker and smoother and easily distinguished by the presence of the second analogue stick and the repositioned Select and Start buttons



The super-sensitive rear touchpad, which has done so much to fire the imaginations of Vita game developers, corresponds precisely to the screen on the face of the hardware







The original PSP 1000 from 2004 is 170mm wide and 74mm high. The Slim & Lite models 2000 and 3000 shave 1mm off the width and 3mm off the height, while the Go is 128mm x 69mm. Vita is bigger: 182mm wide and 83mm tall

product. We believe €250 – €300 for the 3G/Wi-Fi model – is the right price for PS Vita."

Competitive as the price is, with its heaving feature-set, is there a danger Vita will be a jack of all trades and a master of none? "I think that's very much in the hands of developers and the publishing community," Ryan says. "Based on the Vita applications I've seen thus far, that is not going to be the case."

With a 3DS price drop (see p10) raising questions about Nintendo's strategy in the handheld market (as Ryan coolly puts it: "I guess everybody has to look at [the 3DS price drop] and draw their own conclusions"), what is Vita's primary selling point? "Ultimately it comes down to the games and how good they are, and that's what we will sell it on," Ryan says. And this time around, he maintains, SCE isn't looking to flood its own market with ports and imitations of home console hits: "I think the key lesson we learned over time is differentiation – content really does need to be differentiated from what is available on alternate, TV-based consoles."

Much of Vita's software will be available as both download and boxed products, so why is the time still not right for a fully digital platform like, for instance, PSP Go? "We believe, for some consumers, the time is [right], but for other consumers, the time is still not [right]," Yoshida tells us. "So we believe the time is still not right to go download-only as a platform. Some PS Vita titles, like *Uncharted: Golden Abyss*, will be close to 4GB in size, which could be too large to download for consumers who do not have a fast broadband connection. Also, some consumers like shopping in retail stores, talking to knowledgeable store clerks, buying and playing games on the spot. We do not want to remove that capability from consumers." Ryan more bluntly elaborates on consumer preparedness being crucial to the two-pronged retail approach: "There are consumers in parts of the world – this is a global device – where the digital model has not yet fully been embraced."

With Vita, Sony shows an awareness of the shifts in habit and technology that have defined the past few years of portable gaming, but at this year's E3 show, Nintendo introduced a hybrid of handheld screen and home console interaction with Wii U. It's an approach that may have huge ramifications for the way we play, and with Vita's cross-compatibility with PS3, surely there's an avenue for Sony to play the same hardware game. Yoshida, for one, contends that Vita will lead a similar charge for SCE devices: "One of our Sony United goals is to connect many of Sony's devices through consistent user experiences and network services. As a leading device to realise the network future of entertainment, PS Vita will be a key device among future networked devices."

Ryan suggests that whether or not the relationship between Vita and PS3 can mimic the experience of Wii U "will only emerge over time. Obviously the Wii U input device is included in the box of every console, so there's a kind of binary one-to-one relationship there which is not going to be the case any time soon between Vita and PS3. All that being said, we're starting to see some really interesting and exciting examples of the two PS devices interfacing with each other. There were some demonstrated at E3 this year, and a great deal more being worked on."

Ryan's cautious reservation could be read as an echo of the company's uncertainty at this new compatibility frontier. "Last time round, PSP was not a true digital device, and PS2 certainly wasn't, so this is the first shot that we've got at this," he adds. "Where it ends up going is hard to tell at this stage, but it's of considerable interest to us."

For all Vita's new features, and the company's new collaborative approach to hardware R&D (with a finger more firmly on the pulse of modern trends), you can't escape the sense that the platform remains closely allied to PSP in shape and strategy. It's a comparison Ryan chooses to embrace rather than dismiss: "To the extent that PSP targeted the core gamer who was after a good gaming experience, the philosophy is basically the same, but I think the nature of the device we now have allows us to provide a differentiated gaming experience in a manner that the design of PSP simply did not allow." Rather than sell Vita as a multimedia device, however, Ryan proposes a refreshingly straightforward manifesto this time: "The core principle is to provide the best portable gaming experience possible. I think it's as simple as that."

As we explain over the following pages, Vita certainly offers a new way to play familiar games, from racers to platformers, and while the first wave of titles innovates confidently with the hardware's feature-set, there's nothing – yet – that harnesses Vita's potential fully, transforming it from high-end tech to must-have portable console. It's a problem that still faces 3DS six months on from its Japanese launch, and one that can only be solved through the inspired work of developers. Vita, more so than 3DS, sets the stage for bold, experimental gaming. It's just a case of the actors and directors turning up to put on an unmissable show. ■



YOSHIDA ON INNOVATION

"[The] videogame business, like other businesses, is certainly affected by the general health of the economy, but the technological innovations and creativity in content development have a much stronger impact on how successful a particular game platform could become. We have focused on what new opportunities various technological advancements will bring, to create new interactive game experiences on portable devices, popularity of social network games and casual gaming on smartphones, people's lifestyle changes, etc. In a market that changes and grows rapidly, we have had to make PS Vita a unique platform that consumers want to play games on, as well as game developers and publishers want to make games for."



bit.ly/ljkhkD
SCE's Andrew House on avoiding PSP's mistakes

game time.

HANDS-ON WITH THE FIRST WAVE OF VITA SOFTWARE

Getting our hands on a near-final Vita handset – free from the ungainly wires of a devkit and now with silver trim and a shine worthy of a car showroom – we're hit by the realisation that Sony's next-generation promise is now a reality. Beyond the hardware itself, delving into the first wave of titles clarifies how each unique feature of the device is being put to use. Each game harnesses the specific Vita functionality that best serves its purposes.

The rear trackpad in particular has captivated early developers. From ***Uncharted: Golden Abyss***'s rope climbing to ***Wipeout 2048***'s accelerator, it provides a new way to perform old tricks. ***Super Stardust Delta*** shows off a combination of rear trackpad and front touchscreen with its Crush minigame. As asteroids hurtle towards the distant planet you're protecting, you have to tap the front and rear simultaneously to blow up the deadly chunks of space rock. The easiest solution involves pinching the console with your thumb on the front and forefinger on the back which, once mastered, provides a way to interact that really is only possible on this hardware. In the main game, indistinguishable in look and feel from the PSN original, the first major spanner in Vita's works also comes to the fore. With the 'Delta' control configuration, touching the rear trackpad (even slightly) triggers your secondary weapon. It means keeping your hands off the back of the device and bunching your fingers up at either side in Vita's grooves. It's the first moment in which Vita proves awkward in the hand, but even this momentary brush with frustration can be remedied with an alternate control setup.

Super Stardust Delta showcases Vita's ability to accommodate a genre that's never properly made it to handhelds before: the twin-stick shooter. With Vita's comfortable, precise analogue sticks, the disparity in feel between a PSP and a PS3 DualShock 3 controller narrows considerably. Though porting titles isn't at the top of SCE's agenda, it hasn't stopped titles like *Stardust* and ***Hustle Kings*** from closing the gap between controls and usability. Making use of the touchscreen, *Hustle Kings* requires you to flick the cue meter to determine the power of a shot. It may prove a little imprecise for the hardcore but, as with *Stardust*, players have the option of toggling to more traditional controls. Crossplay with PS3 will be an irresistible proposition to the game's core audience, allowing it to be played asynchronously, over extended periods of time, with other users. It could prove an addictive and popular way to keep rivalries heated, and shows that – even at this early stage – developers are making use of Vita's advanced networking capability.

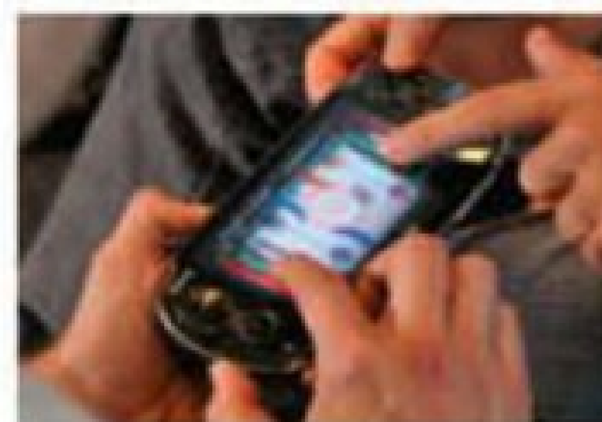


This *LittleBigPlanet* minigame features a Tron-inspired race. Players hold the console upright, and control a vehicle by the stick now positioned below the screen

AR beat 'em up ***Reality Fighters*** hedges its bets on the appeal of Vita's social gaming, too. Allowing you to scan your face with one of Vita's cameras and map it to your fighter, developer Novorama has effectively created a platform for you to settle real-world disputes with your avatars. It's not as serious as it sounds, fortunately, with a subversively comedic streak that allows you to select a range of fighting styles and finishers, from ballerina stance to environment-altering special attacks. You choose backdrops yourself, based on the image captured in the rear camera, from tabletops to rooftops, and there's a simple joy to be had seeing yourself going blow for blow with a friend in the middle of… wherever you are. Essentially a 2D fighter with 3D character models, *Reality Fighters* also demonstrates the comfort of Vita's D-pad, which feels far more robust than its PSP predecessor's.

LittleBigPlanet stands out as the star of Vita's current software showcase, however: from its opening moments, the game puts Vita through its paces. You have to tilt to swing platforms, stroke to play piano and press on the rear trackpad to push platform blocks to the fore. It also looks astonishing – a scaled-down but no less polished or charming version of the home console iterations. Its minigames provide considerable draw, too. First up: air hockey, played on one Vita with a player at either end. The ample screen accommodates both sets of swiping fingers, delivering a more intimate (but never cramped) variation on a game that may work better on a tablet but performs perfectly here. Vita isn't just powerful; it's versatile, drawing together aspects of many current gaming trends from tap-and-swipe to tilt-and-touch.

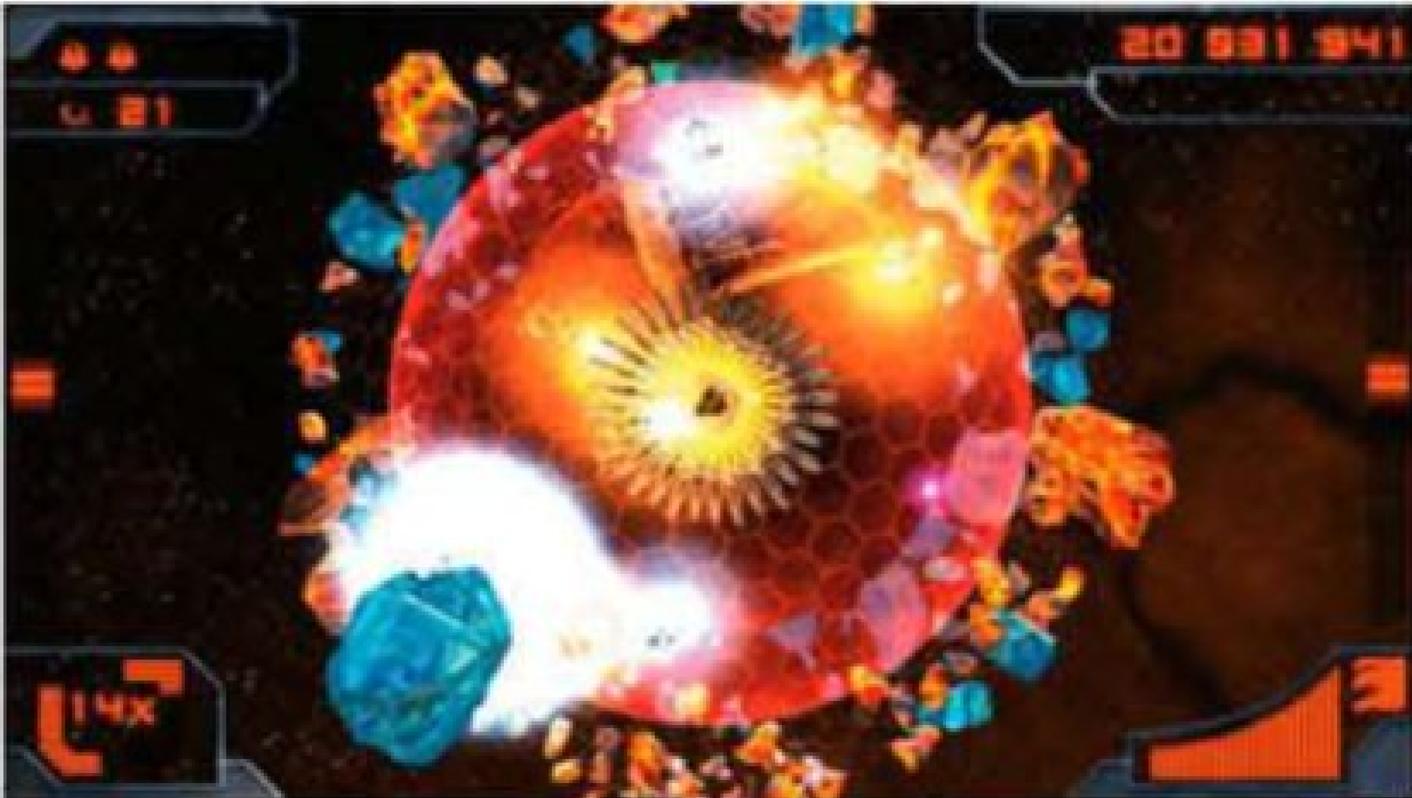




At one point, *LBP* presents a piano keyboard (top) and asks players to tap out a specific tune. Air hockey (above) can be played by two players simultaneously

An extended, unhurried session with Vita's software and hardware proves it can accommodate a wide range of genres and play styles. The device sets a new bar for high-end visuals on a handheld but, more importantly, leaves the door wide open for developers to realise some truly inventive ideas. This highly versatile tool gives designers an unprecedented amount of room in which to experiment. There's little doubt that Vita will play host to some expectation-defying software as it matures. ■





Uncharted prequel *Golden Abyss* (left) is being developed by Sony Bend under Naughty Dog's supervision. *Super Stardust Delta* (above) replaces the series' bombs with devastating secondary fire modes for all weapons



Vita's *LBP* (above) encourages two players to use the same device. *Reality Fighters* (below) makes use of the cameras, while pool game *Hustle Kings* (bottom) is touchscreen-heavy







Wipeout 2084 is set earlier in the series' timeline than previous games, and so brings with it a less futuristic style of architecture



SCE's Liverpool base has a tinge of sci-fi with its angles and brilliant greens. It's appropriate for IP that was vital to the original PlayStation, which celebrated its 15th birthday in 2011

back on track.

WE CHECK IN WITH STUDIO LIVERPOOL TO TALK, AND EXPERIENCE, ALL THINGS WIPEOUT 2048

Studio Liverpool, known as Psygnosis prior to its merger into Sony Computer Entertainment in 1999, may have produced a range of titles for Sony's platforms, but there's one brand with which it's synonymous: *Wipeout*. Debuting in 1995, the racer defined a gaming era and platform.

"Something that we've always done quite well, actually, is target hardware launches," says *Wipeout 2048* game director **Graeme Ankers**. Of course it's really just a modest way of saying that *Wipeout* has a track record of setting the visual bar for Sony's hardware. *Wipeout 2048* continues this tradition with its blistering speed, slick looks and eye-straining levels of on- and off-track detail. Right now, the team at Studio Liverpool is once again in full-on *Wipeout* mode. Nowhere is that more evident than the main floor of its studio, littered with design sketches of futuristic logos, ships, cities and tracks.

"I have to say, I do think it's the biggest one of our games we've made," says Ankers of the production that currently has in the region of 50 staff dedicated to it. "We haven't recycled any of the tracks or ships – everything's new content." Studio Liverpool clearly intends to bring its signature speed and style to Vita, but the real question is what Vita brings to *Wipeout*.

"We couldn't do this game on any other console, like PSP or PS3, touchscreen phones," says fellow game director **Stuart Tilley**. "There's just so much in there. Plus, with the sticks and the power of the thing, it gives us a great opportunity to make a game that can only be done on this piece of hardware. That's kind of our job as Studio Liverpool, and what we pride ourselves on is making a certain piece of hardware look as brilliant as possible."

There were potholes along the way, of course, as the team mined the potential of Vita's new input methods. "The touchscreen was really interesting, trying to [explore the] different ways we could do it," Tilley tells us. "We tried using the rear trackpad, sliding your finger up it for the accelerators, which sounded like a great idea, but we tried it and it sucked. It's a new design challenge. You've got some nice interface stuff for the menus, like a canvas that you scroll around and find missions."



Graeme Ankers says Vita has allowed the *Wipeout 2048* team to implement "augmented reality museums" among other experiments like the game's main menu and track selection screen



Stuart Tilley assures us that the studio will cater to the diehard *Wipeout* fan by allowing players to toggle over to Vita's more conventional control schemes: "You've got sticks and buttons, so you've got your comfort zone if you want it"

These menus impressed us initially, but turned confusing as we got to grips with the game. A crisp white board of tiles with green track icons pops up onscreen. We instinctively navigated by D-pad to our track of choice. Little did we know, however, that you can also highlight the icons by touching the rear trackpad, an incidental gesture which thrusts us unexpectedly into our first race. Using the trackpad in this way is both startlingly precise and refreshingly new. It's a gimmick, sure, but a functional gimmick that proves convenient on repeat use. After a blink-fast loading screen we're on the racing grid with seven AI ships. The map is Queens Bay, a low-level track filled with wide-lane tarmac roads – a clear move away from the super-smooth, devilishly narrow world of *Wipeout HD*. "There's a feeling when we were looking at [previous *Wipeouts*] that sci-fi had become a little bit abstract," Ankers says. "The future had lost the concept of scale between the ships and the environments." There's certainly a renewed sense of scale as we breeze past some familiar architecture and structures. The sense is that *Wipeout* has invaded the contemporary world and coaxed it back towards the more rugged early days of the franchise.

"We took a look at it and said: 'Let's set it 37 years from now, the very first season of *Wipeout* as a sport,'" Tilley explains. "And [we] almost calculated the story of *Wipeout* as well, because I think people have forgotten that. It's very ground-level – there's going to be architecture that you recognise, things that you can



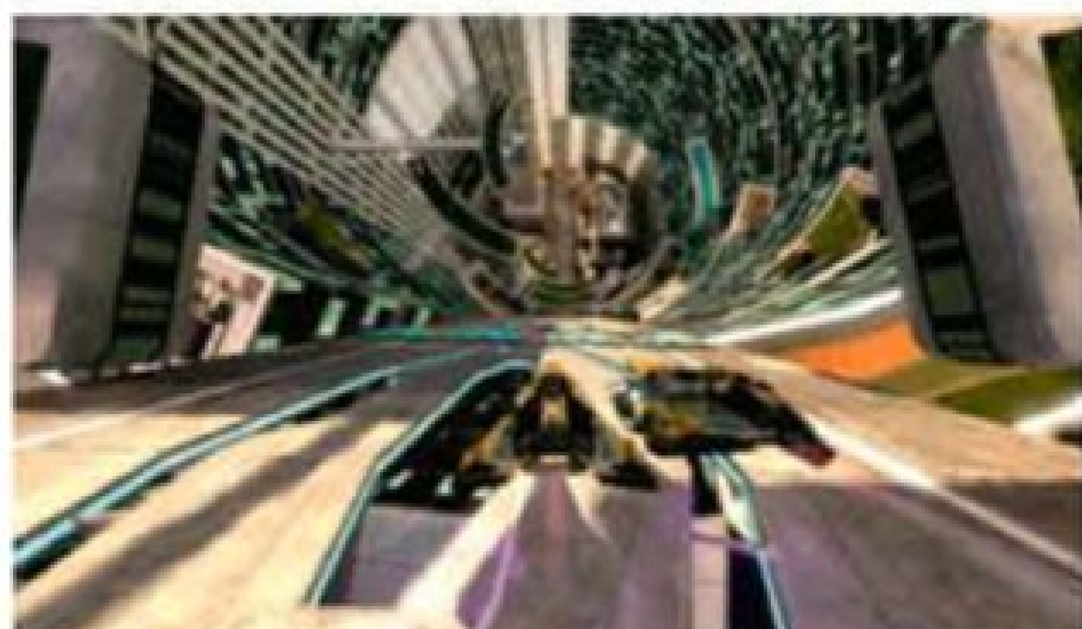
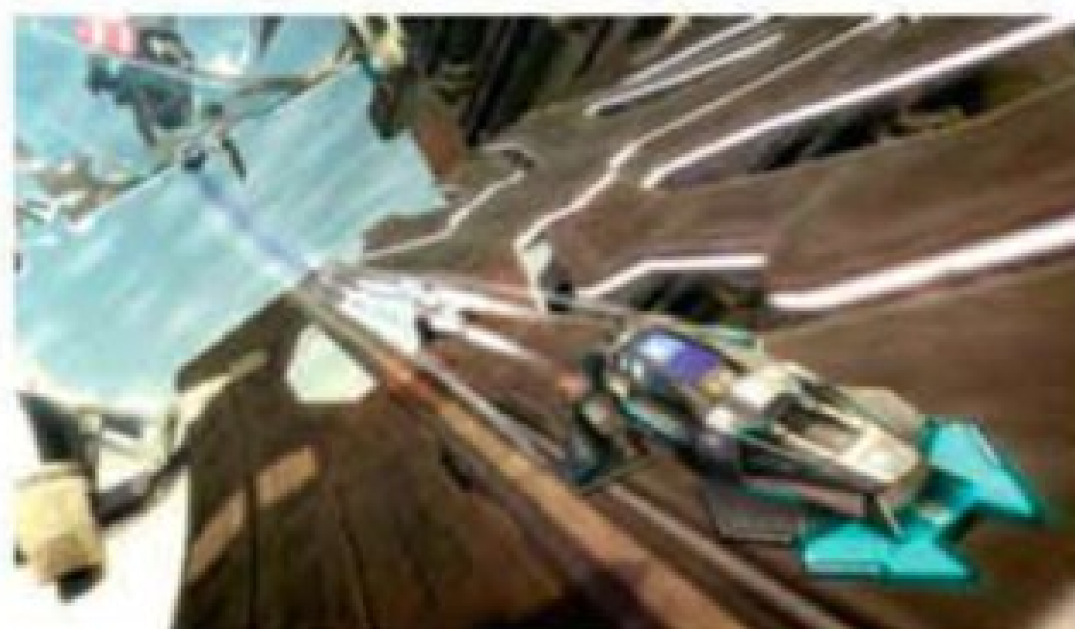


A tour through Studio Liverpool's airy offices is a *Wipeout* fan's dream come true. Concept sketches of futuristic cities, track layouts, vehicle decals and all manner of fantastical designs (above) litter every available section of wall and desk space





Along with racing team logos, visitors' reactions to *Wipeout 2048* have been printed and posted up around Studio Liverpool (left)





The detail on each of the tracks seen so far is as breathtaking as the speed and verticality. The tracks are wider than many previous iterations, but the AI – at higher difficulty – is just as ruthless

see and relate to, things that are around you now. It's not that far out in the future. And the idea then is that the future is this brave new world built on top in layers, so the higher up you go in the city, the more you're exposed to this, which is probably the way that it will evolve. And that eventually keys into the gameplay."

The control method currently comes in three flavours. Two make use of thumbstick and face buttons, while the third has you tilt to steer and grip the rear trackpad to accelerate. All methods feel comfortable after a few laps, and demonstrate Vita's ability to cater to various tastes.

It's when Tilley wanders over to a nearby PS3 and fires up *Wipeout HD*, inviting us to join his game with our Vita, that the platform's position in the Sony device family becomes apparent. Within moments we join Tilley's lobby and appear on the grid of Chenghou Project on both the big and small screen. When the race begins there's not a second of lag for either player, and the race comes down to a split-second difference (Studio Liverpool standardised framerates at 30fps to keep it flowing). "One of the things that's caused a problem is sometimes somebody's setup will be different," Tilley explains. "Some of the HUD elements might be really small, which you get away with on a TV but not on a small screen."

Calibrating the sensitivity of the thumbsticks, for both Vita and a standard-issue DualShock, keeps crossplatform play fair for both big- and small-screen players. "You have to make sure nobody has an advantage," Ankers says. "So the speed and physics have to be the same, the weapon sets have to be the same, and the control has to be the same because just a slight difference like the way a stick leans can make a difference and make lap times faster. So there's all these things, but once we'd got it working we were like: 'Yeah, it works!' Then: 'Oh, crap, we've got to fix all this stuff!'"

On the whole, the veteran studio found developing for Vita a much smoother operation than previous platforms. "I think of all the PlayStations I've worked on, which is actually all of them, it's the easiest one to work with," Tilley says. "The guys have given us a really good set of tools, allowing us to get up and running a lot quicker than we have previously, which is really good. We had a smaller team at the back end of last year that got working straight away on the game stuff rather than too much of the underlying tech, which allows us to really start getting the game in your hands as soon as possible."

Wipeout may be known for setting high visual and performance standards early on in a platform's lifecycle, but Tilley remains convinced that Vita's real benchmarks will come over time. One key reason being its strong potential for social gaming: "I don't think people are quite aware of how much [3G is] going to affect things. You know, a simple thing like 3G on it, it's easy to think: 'Well, 3G, I wonder what that's going to do'. A really simple thing we do in *Wipeout* is our ghost challenge. So you can download a ghost and if you're on the bus, you're away from 3G and that's it, but if you've got 3G it'll download the next best ghost from your next best friend. That means you're always in the game experience irrespective of where you are in the world. And as a game developer that's pretty cool – we can make new and exciting stuff and keep people playing."

Appropriately for a team that deals in the future, then, Studio Liverpool looks forward even as it rewinds the clock on *Wipeout*. Vita may be a new proposition for consumers, but with *2048* they'll have a familiar series to make that acclimation period fly past in a blur. ■

THE PLATFORM GAME

Tilley on how Vita measures up to other Sony hardware: "If you compare it to a PS3, on one hand you can say it hasn't quite got the raw polygon power, but it can handle the pixels a bit better – your antialiasing is computed a lot quicker and a lot smoother, so that you're not going to get jagged lines. Your shadows are antialiased, so they're all lovely and smooth, which would be costly on PS3. So it's all about balance.

"I think when you're looking at it on a smaller screen, you can get away with little bits of it where you're not – you know, you're not sitting close to a 46-inch Bravia. It's a small screen, so the effects that we can do, just the number of polygons you see, as far as looking at it, you'd think it was a PS3. Just first impressions, and I think that's the important thing. We developed this using the same techniques and skills that we did for all our PS3 games as well."

meet the x-men.

THE SUPER-PRODUCERS OVERSEEING DEVELOPMENT OF SOME OF VITA'S BIGGEST THIRDPARTY EXCLUSIVES

Platform-defining games don't happen by accident. Many blossom in the creative hothouses of internal development studios: teams close to a publisher's home, heart and hardware. But a great many more come from the fringes of the development scene. *LittleBigPlanet* – and its forthcoming Vita iteration – is one such property. So how does a studio like Media Molecule get a lifeline to a global platform-holder like Sony?

We find the answer tucked away in the farthest, highest corner of Sony Liverpool's west wing. The team of producers that call this small office space home brings some of the PlayStation brand's biggest properties to the company's platforms. XDev, a reference to the team's function of dealing with external developers, has a rich history of nurturing and securing SCEE's biggest hits and most daring risks. The 22-strong team ensures that the likes of *LittleBigPlanet* and *Heavy Rain* make it exclusively on to Sony's hardware. And yet, to the public and media, they're relative unknowns. In fact, up until a few years ago, as XDev senior director **John Rostron** reveals, they were unknown within their own company.

"We'd go to these huge press conferences for Japan and America where we'd showcase our titles behind closed doors," he says. "We'd always have the *LBPs*, the *Heavy Rains*, the *Killzones* – but nobody ever knew where they came from because it was always just known as an 'external development title Europe'. I suggested we name the studio XDev so it wasn't faceless."

"What we do is promote our developers all the time – they're the stars," says executive producer **Pete Smith**. "So it's 'a Media Molecule game' – get them in front of the press as much as possible. We recognise that's the right way to do it. We want it to be an internal-facing brand, to say this one department is responsible for this breadth of content. What we don't want to do is broadcast ourselves and undermine the efforts of our developers."



John Roston, XDev senior director, is a veteran of the studio and the man responsible for getting the division officially branded



Pete Smith, XDev executive producer, evangelises for XDev's work while understanding the need to remain behind the scenes. It's a delicate act to balance

Humble talk for a studio with more awards statues than it can find space for. Stepping into XDev's cosy office space you're greeted with a wall of BAFTA statuettes, industry awards and plaques. The sense of pride is strong and the level of achievement is clear. The fact is that behind every externally developed SCEE game is at least one XDev producer.

XDev operates on the frontline in every sense, there to inform, guide and manage the studios it takes under its wing. If you're a developer wondering how you get noticed by these shadowy men, fear not, they'll probably find you. "The development scene is aware of XDev – because they need to be in terms of knowing the difference between us and thirdparties, who deal with publishers rather than developers," Smith says.

"I don't think there's a development team across Europe who we haven't touched base with or who might not know that we're here," Rostron adds. "We get a continuous stream of ideas coming in. Everybody thinks their idea's great. It's very rare you'll get a fully formed game, a great concept. We tend to work in partnership with the development teams to turn those ideas into something that will work in the marketplace."

The road to retail is one XDev supervises closely from start to finish. The first step is to find that special something that may lead to the next big thing. Once a pitch comes in, XDev's producers advise developers on the good, bad and ugly of their propositions. "Then the [developer] will go away, come back and say: 'You were right about this, wrong about that' – and that's cool, then we collaboratively come up with something strong. It



XDev's hub in the far reaches of Sony's Liverpool site is colourful and packed with eye-catching promotional material. There's a genuine passion for games here







The opening tutorial of Vita *LBP* offers a crash course in hardware functionality. The potential for user-generated content is huge, and it'll be fascinating to see how it's exploited by players

might be a playable prototype or a concept doc," Smith explains. "We then, at some point, go to our publishing partners – marketing, PR, accountants, management – and say strategically we think this is a good fit because of this, we think it's a great game because of this – which obviously is fundamental – and in the business side it works because of this." From there it's back to the developer for further consultation before full game production ramps up. As a result of such a hands-on process, XDev staff are constantly on the move, especially when they're involved with overseas IP like *Invizimals* or *Killzone*.

XDev plays an instrumental role in feeding titles to Sony's proprietary hardware, and the studio has been around for about as long as Sony has been making gaming hardware. "If you go back to *Destruction Derby*, *Formula One*, they were all external games, but it's evolved over the years to play a different role in terms of what it can bring to Sony," Smith says. "Over that time Sony has increased internal development quite significantly as well, so I think it's right that external development plays a slightly different strategic role for Sony – internally you can do massive, hundred-man teams, you can really go to town with R&D, you get access to new hardware earlier. Externally we can get out a little bit quicker; we can throw a brief out and say we're looking for a particular type of game."

The question the XDev team fields most often – and likes the least – is the obvious, and ominous: what are you looking for? "If we knew that, we'd just do it," Smith adds with a smile.

"We'll take a risk on a Media Molecule, who just came in with a Web page design and a little yellow character, because it just had something about it and everybody found it quite charming," says Rostron.

The experience of Vita, however, was a little different to XDev's PS3 productions. Strict NDAs meant the team couldn't be as vocal in its call to arms as it has been in the past, as Smith details: "We can't just go around talking to any developer about new hardware initiatives. The way it works is the internal teams, rightly so, get access to really early hardware, then we talk to our exclusive developers, then it moves from there as we get less concerned about security. As a result, most of the games that come from externals are exclusives or from developers we trust highly; then over time it goes to anyone speaking to us now about Vita because there are very few secrets."

This means, as Rostron points out, that Vita's second wave of titles will be "a lot stronger than the first", as more developers become familiar with the hardware. And XDev clearly believes in the Vita platform, irrespective of Sony's previous foray into the handheld market. "I think PSP, for me, was the one which was probably the biggest missed opportunity," Smith says. "It was ace, the PSP, and when we got it we were so excited about it and stuff like *Invizimals* – unique, couldn't be done anywhere else – it's a pity [the game] didn't come along earlier. The good thing is we've learned a load of lessons from PSP for Vita, and now we're really looking at it not just being ports of console games; we need some content which feels like it has to be mobile, right to be on Vita, can only live on Vita."

Invizimals, though far from a household name in the UK, is actually one of XDev's most recent success stories. Finding a strong audience in its native Spain, with the sequel currently still performing well in the charts six months after release, its use of augmented reality paved the way for its developer, Novorama, to work on *Reality Fighters* utilising Vita's integrated camera technology.

Vita's new features have proved both exciting and challenging for XDev's pitching process. "There's just so much on a Vita," says Smith. "That was one of the things which, in the early days, was a challenge. You look at rear touch – we're saying to designers: 'It's got rear touch, yeah, we haven't got [demo hardware], yeah, but it's got rear touch – can you make games for it?' They were like: 'Well, we probably can, but it'd help if there was anything which has had rear touch before' – and nothing had. That was a challenge, but also the beauty of it – we had something very unique. All of the features in combination with the power sets it aside."

One of the most high-profile titles currently in XDev's care is *LittleBigPlanet*'s Vita debut. Developed by Middlesbrough-based Double Eleven studios (in close communication with Guildford-based Media Molecule, which famously set the series in motion on PS3), the game spearheads Vita's feature-set and underlines the platform's potential like no other launch title. "Whatever new feature there is on the device, we can open up for creators [with *LBP*] and say, 'Make front-touch games, rear-touch games'," Smith says. "Then all of a sudden when it launches you'll have it in hopefully millions of people's hands creating all kinds of things and only once you get that level of usage will you see, really, what kinds of things people can make with it. What we're doing at the moment is only the tip of the iceberg." ■



SIMPLE GAMES ARE HANDHELD WINNERS

Smith on the cost of Vita development: "Definitely the bigger games are costing more – you've got more power, therefore more polys to push around. But what works so well on handheld devices is simple games with great gameplay; they're not technology driven and therefore don't have to cost a lot of money. One thing about Vita is you've got more gadgets for designers to play with. You might just find some rear-touch game which is amazing, or a combo of rear, front and dual-analogue."



bit.ly/pYwPNy
SCEE on making Vita developer-friendly





The XDev team. From left: Lee Clare (producer), Jean-Paul Roberts (online producer), John Mclaughlin (producer), Kieran Gayner (associate producer), Tom O'Connor (producer), Pete Smith (executive producer), Stephen Griffiths (producer), Robert Karp (producer)





XDev has arguably the most prestigious and populous awards rack in SCE's Liverpool base. Naturally, it has its own guard (left)

With *Sound Shapes*, indie electronic artist Shaw-Han Liem (pictured) teams up with notable indie dev Jonathan Mak to take on game design and development full-time

sounding out.

YOU EXPECTED TO PLAY GAMES ON VITA, BUT GET READY TO PLAY MUSIC, TOO

A thirdparty developer making (sound) waves with Vita is Vancouver-based Queasy Games. Founder **Jonathan Mak** follows up his popular twin-stick blaster *Everyday Shooter* with *Sound Shapes*, a game every bit as striking and even more musical than his PSN debut. Co-designed with musician **Shaw-Han Liem**, *Sound Shapes* aims to turn Vita into a portable music tool. It is one of the platform's most ambitious and experimental titles and shows how a small team can realise big, creative ideas on the device. We catch up with the audio slaves to talk collaboration, inspiration and taking it easy after *Everyday Shooter*.

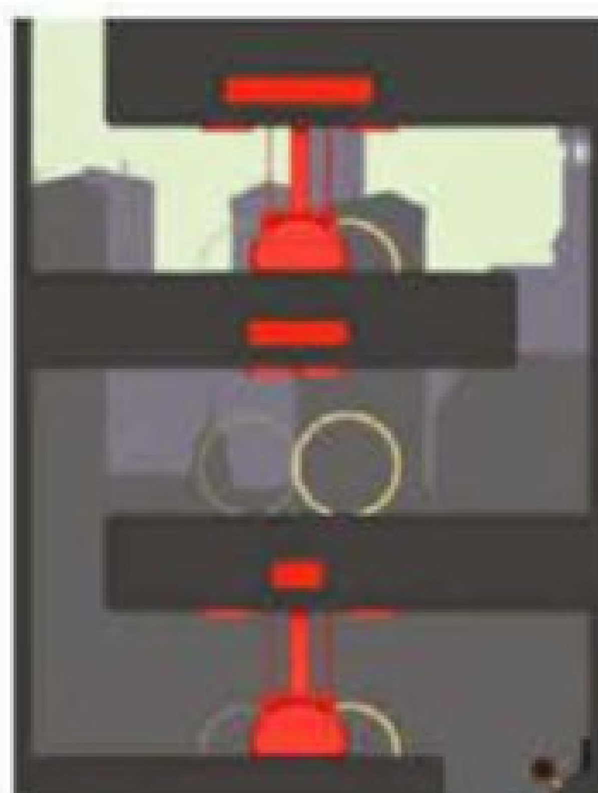
Was *Sound Shapes* something you were working on before Vita?
Jonathan Mak It was planned before. It was the result of a bunch of prototypes that Shaw-Han and I had been working on. So, yeah, it was one of the last, and that's the one we decided to show Sony.

Did Sony push you to integrate certain features, or the new functionality of Vita?
Shaw-Han Liem Obviously people are excited about new things, but I don't think there was ever any pressure to add something just for the sake of adding something. It seems like a lot of the [Vita] titles are picking and choosing the features that best suit whatever the game is that they're working on, and obviously that's how it should be looked at – like a set of tools that you can use. I don't feel like there's any pressure to use, like, the camera, if the game doesn't need it.

You've been developing the audio and gameplay simultaneously – how does that sort of collaborative process work?
JM We were all coming up with a load of really cool ideas and then throwing them all out. Because either a music idea would screw up the gameplay or the gameplay would screw up the music. It was just figuring out the fundamentals of how this is going to go down. So there's a lot of classic platforming stuff that we put in the game and then took out, because we couldn't figure out how you could put that in the editor so that it's fun, makes sense and is also musical. It's kind of a silly design process because you want to do something like make a moving platform move a bit faster, but you can't do that, because it won't fit the music. You just want to put a Goomba on the street, but you can't do that. What does that mean musically? The other thing is the visuals. You have to make sure that the visuals match the music and make it look like it's making the sound that it's making. You come up with this visual, but you can't do that. I think figuring out how to do that, how to solve this insane problem, is what makes the project special.
SL A more positive way to look at it would be that we both come up with ideas that we think are cool either from a musical point of view or a gameplay point of view, and wherever we overlap, that's what goes in the game.



Jonathan Mak on the small-scale *Sound Shapes* team: "We started as just us two. After the prototype we hired two more. There's eight of us right now, and we're looking at contracting some stuff out"





***Sound Shapes* is a platformer with a musical twist. The objective is to guide your rolling, sticky ball to the end of each world but success relies on your ability to move in time to the rhythm of each area's soundtrack. Enemies fire projectiles in time to the beat, meaning button presses are all about timing. The game also includes the same level-editing tools Mak and his team used to create the main game, and also allows custom soundtracks to be integrated into your own creations.**

When you first got your hands on Vita devkits, did it affect the direction of what you'd already conceived?
SL I think we've been involved with the [Vita] process from pretty early on, seeing the early prototypes that are just a giant box of wires, and because so much of the game is designing the tactile interface, it's almost like designing an instrument; it has to work with the sound and how your fingers work, how you're holding the device. There are all these concerns that have to do with the device itself, how it sits in your hand and all of that. So as the hardware is evolving, we're seeing how the form factor changes. Those are all things that are important for us in our design process, for sure.

On that point about working together, what were the key influences on the title?
SL From the point of view of music interaction design, games like *Rez*, stuff like *Elektroplankton*, are huge inspirational projects, in terms of using technology to make this bridge to people that might have never tried making music before, but if you put it in the context [of the game] it can encourage them to create something. I think the idea of the music interactions in the game, those are big inspirational touchstones for us.

It's a much more mellow game than your previous one, Jonathan. Is that Shaw-Han's influence?
JM Yes! Yes! I guess I was very angry. Or maybe not angry, but I think… I hadn't played any platformers before these sessions – I'm not a big platformer fan – but the goal was to create something that people could use, sort of like an instrument. So, typically, making a level editor is not part of my process at all, but it seemed natural [for] a game [in which] you want people to have to play around with music and use it as a tool; you wouldn't want to punch them in the face with it. That being said, you still could make a really hard level.

Portable devices aren't known for their high-end audio capabilities – why choose Vita for *Sound Shapes*?
SL The goal of the game is not to recreate in high fidelity the sound of whatever – you know, an orchestra or something. It's not about hi-def sound. It's about having something in your pocket you can walk around with and pull out and make music wherever you are. So, sure, there might be a trade-off there in terms of sound quality or sound fidelity, but what you get in exchange for that is a sense of mobility and having a tool. Having a little musical instrument that you can carry around with you all the time is way more important than whether the violin sounds like a violin. ■



AN AUDIENCE WITH...

JAAKKO IISALO

The man behind Angry Birds tells us how Rovio created the world's most successful mobile game



Lasse Erkola

"The amount of downloads million downloads was get to 100 million and it

No matter if you're in an aeroplane, on the Tube or waiting in the queue at the supermarket, people everywhere are playing *Angry Birds*. With over 300 million downloads racked up to date, the series' ubiquity should be no surprise.

The public face of Rovio, the Finnish studio behind *Angry Birds*, is often the 'mighty eagle' Peter Vesterbacka, who joined the company after the avian-themed physics challenge became a hit. Little is known of the game's small development team and of thirtysomething **Jaakko Iisalo**, who created both the birds and the game's concept.

As with so many people who comprise the Scandinavian game industry, Iisalo got his start in the demoscene composing tracker music, creating graphics and writing code, before moving on to designing games. Now he's one of the creative forces behind a franchise that has become Finland's biggest videogame export since *Max Payne*.

We sit down with Iisalo as he takes some time off from his busy schedule in his hometown of Helsinki.



CV

Education:
University of Helsinki (computer science)
Employment history:
Katharsis (WAP development); IoBox (art for mobile projects); Rovio (art and design on projects including *Wolfmoon*, *Need For Speed Carbon*, *Totomi*, *Space Impact: Meteor Shield* and the *Angry Birds* series)

You worked as a musician and graphic artist during the late '90s and early 2000s – when did videogames enter the picture?

I've always loved games. I've got about 60 boardgames at home and I own every console out there. I was a huge Nintendo fan as a child. Kids in school had a nickname for me: 'Nintendo-Jaska'. I remember that when we went on this school field trip, the girls were teasing me that I wasn't going to able to play games for a while, but then I got a Game Boy, so problem solved.

I kind of missed the PlayStation era and I came back into gaming via the GameCube – and I've always played games on the PC. I do play all the modern games like *Dragon Age II* and *Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare*, but they just require so much time, which I don't have.

Do you think there's any particular Nintendo influence in your design work for *Angry Birds*?

I think *Angry Birds* is very Nintendo-like in many ways. Nintendo's games are always easily approachable and they tend to be quite relaxed and happy by nature. Their games always concentrate on the core gameplay mechanic and making sure that the gameplay experience is an enjoyable one, so the way Nintendo makes games is the way I want to make games as well.

How did you come up with the game concept at the heart of *Angry Birds*?

We had a really small team and simply set out to make the best game we could. We had the opportunity to make one more game, as Rovio didn't have any more money left. I pitched lots of ideas when we thought about what kind of game we wanted to make. I had dozens and dozens of game ideas with various characters. The birds were originally part of a different concept. I had created a piece of concept art featuring the birds – which everybody loved at the studio – so we settled on using them.

The way that I design games is by drawing pictures. I have to see how the game looks in order to understand it. I try to visualise the gameplay for myself, and drawing it helps. It gives me a feel for what the game's about.

We spent a lot of time thinking about what kind of game we could make that could be a hit. We looked at a lot of games on the web, such as Flash-based games, and we studied what kind of games people liked to play. We wanted to minimise the risks, so to speak, and go with what seemed to work for people. Two-dimensional physics-based games were really popular at the time, especially the kind of games where you launched something in the air. So we decided on that genre and then put the birds that everyone liked into the game. We got the publishing deal for *Angry Birds* based on that single piece of concept art.

What was the logic in pitting birds against pigs? And why did you design the birds to work as projectiles – surely they can fly?

I've always been a bit strange with my ideas [laughs].

is crazy. I thought a amazing. Then you just keeps going..."



Angry Birds has been with us since 2009, when it saw its first iOS release. Since then, it has flown on to ten platforms

I thought that having something a bit offbeat and unexpected would be a good thing. In this case that meant using the birds as projectiles, which I thought was something that would be weird in a good way.

Once we settled on having a game where you shoot at something, everything came together quickly. We required an enemy and for some reason I've been drawing pigs for a long time. When my mother saw *Angry Birds*, she wasn't too surprised; she just said that I've been drawing pigs since I was in school.

So when we thought about enemies for the birds, the pigs came in quite naturally. I tried to make them a bit less piglike, which is why they're green and feature round ears. I like cute, but I didn't want them to be too obviously cute.

I always try to avoid doing what people expect or doing something that's very familiar. You always have to try to come up with some kind of new twist on things, even if it's just some small thing.

Rovio had shipped 51 games prior to *Angry Birds*, and you had worked on some of those, as well as on several mobile games at other companies. What did you learn from those games that you were able to utilise in *Angry Birds?*

Well, by making games, you learn the realities of game development and you gain the knowhow of what works and what doesn't. I was a graphic artist on most of those games, while others did the gameplay design.

I consider myself a hardcore gamer, and in the casual space you have to learn certain realities. You have to make things incredibly simple – you have to present mechanics that are immediately obvious. Even simple gameplay mechanics can be very confusing for casual players.

Very few players even look at the tutorials we have in the game. They just tap the screen to get to the action. It's challenging to even explain the basics, such as how the little blue bird splits into three when you tap the screen. People don't even get that – I so often see players just launching the blue bird and never tapping again to split it up! [Laughs.] When you see the game, you immediately have to understand how it works.

Is that why you added the slingshot?

Yes. We didn't originally have it in the game. I thought we were fine just having an onscreen arrow that you used to launch the bird.

That sounds like a very Scandinavian, non-visual, engineer type of approach.

True, but even when we put the slingshot in, I kept thinking how that would make sense and fit into the bigger picture. Then again, everybody understands how a slingshot works; you don't have to explain it.

One of the most important visual elements in *Angry Birds* is the flight path of the previously launched bird, which stays onscreen and helps players to adjust the following bird's path. Was this something that was always part of the design?

No, that's another feature that we didn't have from the beginning. The team came up with that, just as it did with the arrow button that allows you to skip to the next level. We didn't have that in before our programmer came up with it.

In hindsight, it seems like such an obvious thing to have, something that allows you to quickly get to the next level, but while making games you end up working in a bubble of sorts and don't always realise the obvious.

Rovio has released constant updates and new levels for *Angry Birds*, while retaining a high level of quality. Can you still keep the gameplay experience fresh without losing the simplicity?

It's getting tougher when there are so many new levels published, but we don't just churn them out. Every single level we create has to have an idea or some sort of unique gimmick behind it. It can be something very little, such as a visual element that we repeat and sort of turn into the level's theme to give it a unique personality.

Sometimes you just come up with an idea, but mostly it really comes from trying out different things. You just keep iterating and finding elements that you can turn into a new type of gameplay. Every episode we bring out has to offer something unique – new materials such as the sand and

balloons in *Angry Birds Rio*, for example, and the snow in the *Angry Birds Seasons* Christmas episode.

Every level also has an ideal way of completing it so that you can attain all three stars. For the casual gamers, they don't care – they just want to get to the next level – but if you're one of the hardcore out there, you can go for the three stars [on each level].

What were your expectations for *Angry Birds* when its development was finished?

I was just happy that I finally got to make a game that I felt good about. That was enough for me. A videogame is a personal thing, but it's also a commercial product, so you hope others like what you have created.

When you make a game, you get to a point where it finally becomes fun to play. When we made the game and people in the office started playing it, they stuck with it for at least 15 minutes at a time and others would gather to see someone playing. Then everybody starts to play it and really like it – and then you know you're on to something. I remember that before we shipped, our COO Niklas Hed gave the game to his mother to try out. She never plays games, but she played it for hours and she loved it.

We had very little user-testing. We just made a game that we all liked. We really emphasised extremely accurate touchscreen controls because we definitely didn't want to have any sort of onscreen joypad. I hate those.

The amount of downloads we've gotten is crazy. I thought one million downloads was amazing. Then you get to 100 million and it just keeps going... It's difficult for me to grasp. When I'm at the office or at home, nothing's really changed; you just keep working away. I love making games, so of course it's a great feeling when others enjoy your work.

Is there any formula or checklist of features that increases your chance of success on mobile? How much is success due to happenstance and how much is it due to manipulating platforms such as the App Store?

A lot of it's down to luck and timing. Like I said, we did spend time looking at what was popular on the casual gaming side to try to minimise the risk of failure. I think that's something you can repeat to some extent. If you look at the success of *Tiny Wings* – which is a great game – there were quite a few very similar Flash-based games around before it arrived on mobile devices.

Once you find something that seems like people could like it, you have to take that and improve it – make it somehow unique and better than the competition. Of course, that's not necessarily enough.

We had no advertising banners. If you look at our sales spike, it's very familiar to anyone who has dealt with the App Store. Once Apple took notice of us and we got the banner in the App store, our sales skyrocketed. We did spend a lot of time getting there in order to gain that visibility in the store.

You have to have a product that has legs once the initial sales spike is over. Once we knew we'd get that visibility in the store, we created the first story trailer and released it. We tried to take as much advantage of the visibility as we could.

You have to have a great idea for a game. It has to have heart and soul. For me, that's the most important thing. I see a lot of technically great games, but they have no soul and the content is lacking.

The characters in *Angry Birds* are super-important. I think the characters are almost more important than the game. Of course, nobody would know the characters if it wasn't for the game, but once it ships and takes off, it's the characters that are associated with the brand.

You were working at Rovio when it had shrunk to nine people and could only afford to create one more game. Now the company's grown to over 150 employees and *Angry Birds* has become a global phenomenon. How has life changed for you professionally?

You know, not that much. Obviously, I don't know every employee any more. We have our game development area, which is separate from the merchandising and marketing folks. When we only had a few people, communication was far easier and things were more personal, but now we're more like a well-oiled machine.

I used to create all of the levels myself, but now I have a team creating them. Whenever we have a version of the game shipping on some new device, I still play the builds from beginning to end to make sure that everything is as it should be, as I know the game inside out.

It's nice to be in an important position, but then you end up doing a lot of random stuff instead of coming up with new ideas, which had me quite miserable for a while. Lately, we've been able to accommodate things so that I have more time to be creative and think of new ideas, which I feel great about.

Rovio is staffing up a console development team, presumably to expand *Angry Birds*' reach even farther, but will the company ever work on another IP?

It wouldn't hurt! I'm sure in the long run we want to, but we have to find something that's going to be really good. *Angry Birds* is the hot thing right now and pays the bills, so of course we'll make more. We want to be on every platform – tablets and so on. We want *Angry Birds* on everything.

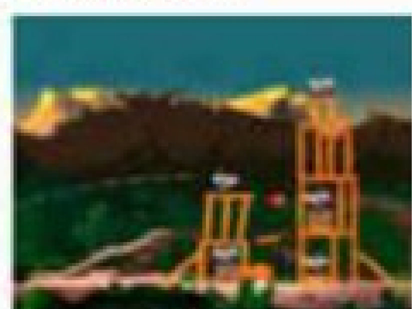
I think we are only at the beginning. We can expand the franchise and make different *Angry Birds* games, kind of like how Mario has expanded into all these different genres. There's a lot of potential to make different games with these characters and I'm really interested in doing that.

Do you eventually want to work on more traditional videogames on a bigger scale, on Xbox 360 or PS3?

Not really. I'm more into the indie stuff such as *Super Meat*

SMALL TEAM EFFORT

The original *Angry Birds* game was built by just four people. The programmer was Tuomo Lehtinen, with Tuomas Erikoinen handling graphics alongside Iisalo, who also created roughly 90 per cent of the levels. Raine Mäki was producer, and Ari Pulkkinen, who scored *Super Stardust HD*, composed the music. For the level design, Rovio uses customised tools. "It's important that each object 'feels' right," Iisalo says. "Each has to interact correctly with every other object. Everything has to break in a satisfying fashion, too."





Rovio clinched *Angry Birds'* publishing deal thanks to this piece of concept art, created by Iisalo. Note that his beloved pigs weren't yet in the picture

Boy. I would love to do something along the lines of the PixelJunk games. Triple-A games require hundreds of people and you can't control every aspect of the game, which is what I want. I'd love to have a small team that could spend a while working on a game.

What would you say are the pros and cons of developing and selling on Android and iPhone?

The iPhone is a closed platform with very few devices and with centralised sales. That makes it easy for us.

Developing for Android reminds me of working with Java games back in the day. You have to port the game to machines with different specs and different display sizes, so it's a more complicated platform to work on.

Then again, it's an open platform, and there are benefits to that as well. Still, selling on the Android platform is just much more complicated – which is why we give the game away for free on Android platforms and generate our revenue via advertising.

The game development scene in Finland feels vibrant right now, with many new startups and investment coming through thanks to the success of games such as *Angry Birds* and *Trials HD*. How do you see the Finnish game industry as a whole?

It looks really good. We had success a while ago with *Max Payne*, and then we hit a bit of a dry period – but now it seems that we're on a roll. Quite a few development teams have been able to generate hits, such as Housemarque with *Super Stardust HD*, and of course *Trials HD* [developed by RedLynx] has been huge.

Alan Wake [from Remedy Entertainment] was good, too. Digital distribution has really opened the doors here, and, to me, the scene feels really good. The government has also slowly begun to understand that our industry is something that should be supported.

What are Finnish developers doing differently or better than they were before?

Our strength has always been technology, but what really has changed is the attitude. We used to have a bunch of nerds like me making the kind of old-school games we wanted to make without any consideration of the fact that we were working on a commercial product. That's changed.

We understand that this is a business and that we're making games for an audience. Now that we have had success stories, developers' eyes have opened as to what can work out and what can't.

I keep coming back to the fact that you have to have a game with a soul. Someone has to have a strong vision for what the game is about. You get nowhere by just copying and producing a lifeless clone. There just aren't a lot of folks out there with fresh, good ideas. Just look at the number of *Angry Birds* clones that are out there. ■

"We used to be a bunch of nerds like me. That's changed"

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ESPERATE GAMES CALL for desperate measures. Last year, executives at Electronic Arts found themselves between a rock and a hard place. They had planned a revival of the basketball simulation series *NBA Live* under the new brand *NBA Elite*. The game was to be largely innovative, and was meant to go above and beyond the average yearly sports game update. However, near the end of the game's development cycle, the company was forced to face a sobering fact: the game wasn't going to come together in time. The publisher had already released a delayed, glitch-filled demo that players considered highly disappointing. What's more, the competition, 2K Sports' *NBA 2K11*, was shaping up to be the finest basketball game in years.

With its options dwindling, EA chose the road less travelled and cancelled *NBA Elite* at the last minute, a costly choice as the company had already made large advertising buys and flushed millions into development. Was it a savvy business move that protected the company's brand, and raised consumer confidence that EA stands for quality? Or should it have released regardless of the long-term consequences? Would it even be ethical for EA to hope consumers made the mistake of buying an inferior product?

Some projects just don't pan out. It's a fact of life in the videogame industry. Sometimes ideas that sound great on paper just aren't fun when put into practice. Sometimes a team – for whatever reason – doesn't coalesce. The market can shift drastically between conception and release; sometimes the publisher simply runs out of the money or patience to see a project through.

Is the only option to cancel, waste millions of investor dollars and probably cost dozens or hundreds of people their jobs? Is there a sensible middle-ground between getting customers to pay for your shoddy game and condemning your studio?

Done properly, paid betas can be both beneficial for the customer and lucrative for the developer

One creative option that has become popular lately is the paid-beta approach taken by games such as *Minecraft* and *SpyParty*, whereby gamers 'buy' the game in its beta (or even alpha) form on the understanding that the game is not yet complete. This can go a long way towards helping smaller developers raise the cash to finish development while being fully honest with the players. The other option is to go free-to-play, offering players the chance to try the game risk-free, with the opportunity for further payment if they want to continue to immerse themselves in the game. When done properly, both options can be beneficial for the consumer and lucrative for the developer.

Many people hasten to point out that an ethical wrongdoing implies malicious intent. So for a publisher or indie developer to be firmly in the wrong for charging customers for a bad game, they'd have to set out to make a poor-quality game – which, obviously, no company sets out to do. So how do bad games happen?

In 2010, Game Developer magazine featured a high-level analysis of all of its post-mortem articles. It analysed what went wrong (and what went right) throughout the development of 24 different videogames. The study found that 56 per cent of all problems arose from issues in management of the production.

This is to say that when a project fails, it's rarely the fault of the grunt coders, artists or even the designers. Far more often it relates to how the team is managed. This can relate to people being overworked or a team that has trouble communicating. It can also factor in excessive crunch time and staffing problems. These kinds of scheduling hiccups can lead to a lack of time for a lengthy code freeze – a period where new features have ceased to be added and all focus shifts to removing glitches – which can have a serious knock-on effect.

"One tiny code change can lead to massive bugs," says **Simon Carless**, global brand director at UBM Techweb and director of the Game Developers Conference. "What developers aim to do is to have zero critical bugs before release. But if your game is gigantic, and if the amount of time from the final code freeze to release is too short – and indeed, if fixing bugs introduces more bugs, as it often does – you can see how this might happen. Luckily, the Internet provides a way to help patch problems. And unluckily, the Internet also provides an 'out' for publishers or developers that may make them a tiny bit less paranoid about finding all the issues, since they know that they can patch."

Far Cry 2 is a fantastic example of a game that had the very best intentions, yet never truly achieved all that it promised. It had amazing ideas, but the massive load of its production simply proved too much.

But despite its deep faults, few people would say that *Far Cry 2* was a bad game. In fact, many consider it one of the finest games of the past few years. Yet it brings up interesting questions about honesty in the marketing of bad games. Videogame companies have a bad habit of promising the world when a game is still in production. Perhaps as a consequence of being so excited about their project, marketers and developers can find themselves promising features that may not make it into the final version.

Many games start out with ambitious ideas, but as ship dates get closer and closer the reality starts to seep in. "As experiments in delivering new experiences fail, and time ticks by, individuals tend to retreat to more conventional or established solutions, which not only wither the blossoms of innovation, but can kill it at the root," wrote **Clint Hocking**, the game's creative director, in a post-mortem.

Is it fair to the consumer, however, for marketers to trumpet innovation during the pre-release hype, then keep mum when those features don't make the final product? It's hard to imagine a company publishing an erratum of all its failed promises on the eve of a product launch, but maybe it shouldn't be.

"When ethical advertising and public relations information are transparent – possible problems are disclosed and warnings provided – the public is provided with the appropriate information to make informed

Fallout: New Vegas was at the centre of a maelstrom of debate about quality standards upon its release in October 2010. Many players complained of catastrophic game-breaking bugs

DUKE NUKEM FOREVER: A CAUTIONARY TALE

In the debate over the ethicality of releasing poor-quality games, you'd think that *Duke Nukem Forever* would be the poster child for those arguing that it is, in fact, unethical. The game was the laughing stock of the industry for over a decade as it struggled through development and was ultimately cancelled, resurrected and patched together as a Frankenstein's monster of a game, then finally released in May 2011. It's been one of the most poorly reviewed games of the year, picking up a 3/10 in the pages of **Edge** 230.

However, *DNF*'s story is more complicated than that. No game survives in development hell for 14 years unless it's a labour of love. When the game was cancelled in 2009, employees began to speak out about the horrendous production. Soon it became clear that the whole time the industry was laughing at *DNF*, the developers at 3D Realms were doing everything in their power to produce the best game they possibly could.

In fact, it was this relentless pursuit of perfection that ultimately doomed the game. It was the dream project and the life's work of lead designer George Broussard, and he refused to let it go until it was – at least in his mind – perfect.

There was reportedly even an inside joke around the 3D Realms office that workers should do everything they could to stop Broussard from playing any new games, because he'd invariably want to implement their features into *DNF*.

More than that, Broussard wasn't afraid of completely rebooting the project whenever a new game engine became available. The game was originally designed using *Quake II*'s engine in 1997, which the company reportedly paid $500,000 to use. Then much of the project needed to be rebooted when Epic's Unreal Engine became available and Broussard insisted on switching. The game was later rebooted again when Unreal Engine 2 appeared.

"George's genius was realising where games were going and taking it to the next level," said **Paul Schuytema**, who worked on *Prey* with Broussard, in an interview with Wired US in 2009. "That was his sword and his Achilles heel. He'd rather throw himself on his sword than have the game be bad."

Broussard may have failed to lead that team to success, but he may also have been a mad genius who was more committed than anybody to bringing gamers the perfect product.

Ultimately, Broussard never chose to fall on his sword. He instead continued working on the project until the day that 3D Realms went out of business.

Duke Nukem Forever strove valiantly to give Nukem fans everything they could ever want in a firstperson shooter, and ultimately resulted in one of the most public failures in gaming's history. There's little denying, however, that both Boussard's and 3D Realms' hearts were in the right place.

Duke Nukem is crude, but that doesn't mean his games have to be. *Forever* rose to the top of the UK charts, displacing *LA Noire*, a game that had attained higher review scores

decisions," says **Jim Lukaszewski**, a member of the Public Relations Society of America Board of Ethics and Professional Standards. In other words, it's perfectly all right to promise your fans the world, so long as you come clean about it before they lay down their cash.

Unfortunately, not everyone is completely honest about their finished (or unfinished) product, and will in fact go so far as to momentarily suppress potentially damning opinions. Some publishers will use 'tiered embargoes', for example. Embargoes are commonly used in journalism, and generally state that a publication may not publish a set of information until a certain date. Usually they're used to keep Web sites from hastily rushing their articles online in attempts to beat each other, but these days may be used for slightly more insidious purposes.

A tiered embargo is a PR tactic that allows only the highest review scores to be published first. The idea is to prevent low scores from being seen in the first few days of the game's availability, inflating the game's Metacritic score during the most critical days of the release. "This sort of thing is common in all forms of entertainment, and as long as consumers are educated about how Metacritic takes that into account, it's not a huge deal," says **Ben Kuchera**, games editor at tech Web site Ars Technica. "That said, we need to be educating readers and gamers on all these tricks that PRs use to get higher scores, so everyone knows to look for them."

At their least influential, tiered embargoes can artificially inflate the review scores of bad games for a few days, and create the impression that the critics are unanimous. At their worst, they can create an incentive for unscrupulous publications to raise their score in order to be among the first to post, garnering them a surge in readership.

> "A new intellectual property has to deliver a strong-quality score if it hopes to see a successful sequel"

Why is any of this important? Well, because marketing only takes you so far. As Lukaszewski tells us: "Success based on deception is usually very short-lived." Creating a long-term fanbase and a successful franchise cannot be achieved through tricky marketing tactics alone.

"Internally at EEDAR we have developed a 'brand equity' model that attempts to measure what a game ultimately delivers in comparison to consumer expectation," says **Jesse Divnich**, a game industry analyst with Electronic Entertainment Design and Research (EEDAR). "We've generally found that a new intellectual property has to deliver a strong-quality score if it ever hopes to see a successful sequel. While it varies between genres, the general average is that a new IP must score above 83, in aggregate, for it to see growth in its sequel. Eight times out of ten, those that don't achieve a minimum quality standard do see declines in their sequels."

In the videogame industry, bad games are bad business. There is some good news for companies that have put out bad titles recently, though: gamers probably won't hold it against them. "Most mainstream gamers are unaware of the developers behind their videogames," says Divnich. "We have some standout developers such as Rockstar, EA Sports and Bungie, but other than a few that have been able to carve out a public identity, most consumers are unaware of the developer and therefore most companies are unable to have any reputation among the mass market."

That said, when it comes to individual titles, the wrath of the consumer can be fierce. "The most damaging thing they do is spread negative word of mouth about their experiences, which is so easy to do today," says **Vicki Morwitz**, professor at the NYU Stern School of Business and president of the Society for Consumer Psychology. She adds that consumers may even see switching brands as a mean of getting revenge.

Divnich points out that consumers can also be forgiving. "For established brands with a precedent of delivering a high-quality experience, they can usually get away with one bad title before [their] reputation begins to diminish," he says. "As a rule of thumb, if your first title received critical acclaim, but you failed to meet expectations the second time around, you can expect sales to be flat; if the sequel met expectations, it generally results in growth. Fail to meet expectation twice and sales begin to decline significantly."

The gaming industry remains divided on the ethical implications of selling sub-par software. As previously stated, sometimes games just don't come together as well as their makers hope. The issue is whether or not it's ethical to acknowledge that failure and then try to sell it anyway. Our own research yields a wide variety of opinions from many different sectors of the industry.

"It depends on that fine line between 'it might have an audience' and being *Superman 64*," says one developer who preferred to remain anonymous. "The latter is probably unethical."

"I don't know that there's a 'right' answer here – you have to look at it from a case-by-case basis," Kuchera says. "This gets even more complicated when you look at how many games ship with day-one patches or major issues and then go on to great success. From a purely business point of view, you have to factor in the idea that in many cases gamers don't care enough about these issues [for them] to impact [upon] their decision to buy the game."

Others draw a harder line. "I think it's unfortunate, and sometimes heartbreaking, that such games exist," says **Kevin VanOrd**, reviews editor at GameSpot. "But I don't think we can say that it's unethical – at least, not with any kind of one-size-fits-all authority. I have long rallied against buggy, unfinished games. Apologist arguments irritate me no end. Developers and publishers should release a complete product. Doing anything less harms everyone involved."

The industry isn't going to cease putting out poor-quality games any more than it's going to stop making incredible ones. However, the current trend towards unique business models such as paid betas should help to alleviate some of the pressure publishers face to put bad games out on to the market in disguise. The more options publishers have, the better off players will be. ■



Rather than charging full price up front, F2P games like *Lord Of The Rings Online* dole out their content piecemeal, recouping costs by charging for items, zones and experience boosts

PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Super Stickman Golf iOS
Virtual takes on golf have traditionally retained not just the rules but the natural, outdoorsy features of the game as well. Not so with *Super Stickman Golf*. Canadian developer Noodlecake has abstracted the experience in refreshing ways, shrugging off the sport's serious-face aura. To begin with, grass has been deleted. Level-design absurdism means you get to play in outer space, in a flower-power world and even inside giant letters. You can also unlock power-ups to shave your stroke count. A polite golf clap would hardly do it justice.

Arma 2: Operation Arrowhead PC
It's ironic that the fastidious pursuit of accurate simulation is what often makes this game absurd, cumbersome and chaotic. Some five months of patches later, however, and *Arrowhead*'s awkward dynamism can be manipulated into truly thrilling scenarios. Our home-made dawn raid, followed by panicky helicopter extraction, sits up there with the best co-op kicks we've had, only slightly tarnished when one of our crack team got stuck inside a boulder.

Geometry Wars 2: Retro Evolved 360
The sequel to Bizarre Creations' legendary twin-stick shooter gleefully puts the 'steroids' in *Asteroids*. With its perpetual neon carnage and thumping soundtrack, the eyes and ears may get blunted, yet we tumble into the 'one more game' loop without complaint. The game ramps up slowly, but before we can stop to appreciate the escalation of intensity, we're blasting our way through a game space packed to bursting with enemies, narrowly escaping death with abrupt, twitch-driven shifts in direction. At a certain level of mastery, your brain shuts off and you attain a flow state in which your reflexes and intimate knowledge of each enemy's movement behaviour take over completely. Neon nirvana.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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Fiction without friction: if the plot fits, wear it

The vision of the future on display in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (p108) is one of overweening corporate control and industrial expansionism. It's one in which the gulf between rich and poor has exploded with the costly advancements of transhumanism. And it's one in which elitism, oppression and violent unrest are cultivated by the powerful for their own ends.

It's a good story, in other words. But this future is also one in which energy snacks are rarer and more precious than pistol ammo; one in which people shed PDAs and passwords like dandruff; where surveillance is conveniently and improbably rare, and shopkeepers look on placidly as you walk into their back room, stuff a handful of biscuits into your face and pocket their credits. Odd, too, that your final objective is nearly always immediately next to a helipad. You'd think that you might have tried to land there in the first place.



It's a good game, in other words – but often at the expense of total narrative coherence. Which is not to say that you should care: the gamer brain is able to unpick that sort of dissonant oddity with ease. What is perhaps surprising is that in *Driver San Francisco* (p112) you rarely need to do this at all. Its story – which is all a dream, more or less – isn't nearly as ambitious as *Human Revolution*'s; indeed, it's a crutch for ludicrous and extremely enjoyable mechanics. But, in terms of coherence alone, there's clearly a virtue to making the game you want first, then bending a story around it. *Driver* is confident and unapologetic – and maybe gaming needs this as much as it needs clever narratives. Stories that serve the medium, in other words, rather than describe a world beyond it.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution

Publisher Square Enix
Developer Eidos Montreal
Format 360, PC (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

bit.ly/rn57c7
Extended interview with Jonathan Jacques-Belletête

Human Revolution begins clumsily and in at least that sense it's a true successor to the first game. Whereas 2000's 'thinking man's shooter' dropped the player off at a terrorist-occupied Statue of Liberty with barely more than a pat on the back, Eidos' prequel over-eggs the orientation, locking the player into a series of technobabble-filled cutscenes and on-rails sequences that hurriedly set the scene. The year is 2027 and you are Adam Jensen, part-time World's Gruffest Cyborg contender, full-time security chief at Sarif Industries – a biotech firm on the verge of a seminal announcement. Not everyone is eager to see this come to pass, and the violent persecution of Sarif Industries by forces unknown becomes the main thrust of your investigation.

Once the exposition settles down and you are finally allowed to forge your own path through the streets of seedy, derelict Detroit, the plot against Sarif begins to unravel, embroiling first the local corrupt cops, terrorist cells, shady government outfits, avaricious corporations and beyond. It's a gripping narrative, and one which feels all the more significant and personal by dint of the player's own detective work – turfing through conspirators' desktops and misplaced PDAs, connecting the dots between email headers and factional interests.

The narrative stretches across two major civilian hubs and many more mission locations besides. The crumbling Detroit is your first playground, and then later the smog and neon of Heng Sha island – and though both feel claustrophobic in comparison to the open-world cities of other games, they are nonetheless a sizeable sprawl, densely populated with interactivity, drawn with a squalid sort of beauty and peopled by colourful, well-drawn characters. The chippy systems specialist Pritchard is the most frequent voice in your ear, and an uncertain ally, while the tomboyish pilot Malik is a more obviously sympathetic figure. Then there's David Sarif himself, every bit the swaggering CEO, with his authority, easy charm and warmth concealing... what, exactly? While voice acting wavers among the bit-parts, and the script is sometimes leaden, sometimes cartoonish, the principle characters deliver a strong showing. You even warm to Jensen, who manages to be a perpetual misery guts regardless of your dialogue choices, and despite the fact he sounds like Timothy Olyphant impersonating Clint Eastwood recording a voiceover for an especially listless sat-nav.

The story is, dare we say it, probably a better yarn than that delivered by the first game. Its themes are certainly more relevant. While *Deus Ex* was more consciously a pastiche, starting with the premise that every conspiracy theory is true and spiralling off into hysteria about aliens, *Human Revolution* focuses on more immediate and credible issues surrounding transhumanism – its effect on morality, the vast social inequalities it will create and how the powerful will seek to subvert its potential to their own ends. And the game is particularly good at illustrating how power sustains itself through illicit collaboration between corporations, governments and the media. You only need to turn on the TV to see how relevant that is.

> Perhaps you can talk your way past the guards, using pheromones to bring them round to your way of thinking



Many games cravenly avoid politics for fear of offence; *Human Revolution* is explicit about it, but this isn't to say its ideas are delivered as an unending sermon. This is also a game about the thrill of sneaking into places you aren't meant to be, or, alternatively, carving your way through security with a pair of cyborg elbow blades. This is a game about player choice above all things, and it is given ample expression in the way you outfit and upgrade Jensen with biotechnical marvels, explore the world and choose to engage (or not) its many obstacles. Environments are packed with opportunities – perhaps you can talk your way past the guards, using a squirt of pheromones to bring them round to your way of thinking. Maybe a vending machine hides a spacious vent through which Jensen can shuffle. A nearby keypad might give a skilled hacker the ability to turn sentry guns on their erstwhile masters. Perhaps you'd prefer to do the dirty work yourself, blasting away with a plasma rifle while your dermal armour upgrades deflect damage. *Human Revolution* is a robust and ruthless shooter, should you choose to play it that way, with heaving, potent guns and deadly opponents, quick to flank or flush you out with grenades. The addition of cover mechanics sits comfortably with the game, allowing Jensen to engage enemies brazenly, but without discarding all sense of vulnerability.

Our preferred method is discretion, however; finding unseen paths and delivering context-sensitive knockout moves to witless sentries. Even stealth has a tautly balanced action element: cloaking systems and melee takedowns both deplete your energy level, leaving you vulnerable if you don't time activations carefully or have an ample supply of calorific snacks to boost your batteries. Nor are you forced to choose between stealth and combat indefinitely; Jensen is much more of a generalist than the first game's JC Denton was, and with the right kit can flit between roles. Indeed, so often do plans get overturned by the dynamic, complex behaviour of the world that you are encouraged to chop and change and live with the consequences. The game blunders in making this apparent – our choice to take non-lethal stealth options wherever possible was supported without a hitch for the opening six or seven hours, but then the game rudely deposited us via a cutscene in a face-to-face arena battle with a foe who could sustain more damage than we had ordnance to fire

ABOVE Combat is often about crowd control. Jensen's health recharges to a certain point when out of the line of fire, making single opponents less of a threat if you have cover. But, even with the protection of dermal upgrades, you will be quickly whittled down if you allow yourself to get flanked.



LEFT The game's most prominent theme is that human advancement will widen the divide between haves and have-nots. Detroit is subject to violent protests against augmentation, while the citizens of lower Heng Sha literally live in the shadow of the powerful, who have simply built another city on top

BELOW There are upgrades to reduce recoil, but we were steady enough without. Upgrades are rarely found, but doled out with XP or available for a price. Choosing is tough – momentary conveniences vying with your long-term plans



ABOVE Some characters will judge you on the subtlety of your approach, and few respect indiscriminate slaughter. Your choices are more personal, more immediate and less about factional allegiance than in the first game



The technology underpinning *Deus Ex* occasionally struggles to attain the fidelity of its peers, but it easily surpasses them in the design of its locations – as with the grandiose antechamber to a CEO's office here

at him. It's a pattern replicated in the game's several other lamentable boss battles – although we were by then forewarned.

There is also an inequality between platforms in the sorts of roles you might take. Combat feels a little more natural on 360, with a streamlined interface ensuring your kit is always at your fingertips. On PC, meanwhile, you occasionally end up squinting at the UI in the midst of battle, trying to remember where your healthkit was. Hacking, however, is a chore with a gamepad. It takes the form of a smart minigame in which you capture points on a network, working your way towards a target node while a trace expands from the computer's security systems, hunting for your point of entry. There are many tactics at your disposal: you can fortify points you've captured, making it harder for the trace to get through, deploy viruses to disrupt the security system's efficiency, or find nodes which reduce the resistance along your chosen route. Even on PC this interface is not without its issues – it feels slightly unresponsive to your clicks, while UI elements occasionally obscure important details. On console, you have to keep a trigger depressed at all times to keep the zoom at a useful level, while simply moving the cursor between points is unbearably sluggish for a minigame designed for fast calculation and response.

Quibbles about boss battles and hacking aside, few games offer this level of expression. Even Bethesda's RPGs, with their malleable skillsets and open worlds, rarely allow players such dominion over the environment – even if, with *Human Revolution*, that dominion is often prescribed in the convenient design of ventilation systems. But it's the way that your larger decisions trickle down through these low-level choices that makes the game remarkable and unique for each player. A decision to help a victim of extortion means that we end up spending half a day experimenting with different non-lethal methods to neutralise pockets of security without alerting the entire Heng Sha police force, just so we can break into a few lockups without harassment and find funds for the side-mission. Our multi-stage solution involving the split-second juggling of tranquilliser darts, dual-takedowns and invisibility is obscenely cool, a heist sequence of such fluidity and audaciousness that it would look the part in a Chris Nolan film, although we suspect he might have got the action in the can in a smaller number of takes. And that's the kicker: for a game that is so much about the delight of experimentation, with often fatal consequences, the loading times punish you. On our none-too-shabby PC, they clocked up 20 to 30 seconds; running off disc on 360, we sometimes sat there waiting for just under a minute.

While the game is plenty long, dramatically it wants for a stronger third act with its own city hub to explore. Its closing chapter will also prove divisive. But such things are hard to resent when its 30-plus hours offer such a dense experience, rich in choice and saturated with credible detail and powerful, intriguing ideas. From its sluggish, restrictive start, *Human Revolution* opens into a world of scintillating possibility in which your actions' significance reaches far into the future. And with something like that difficult future approaching fast, *Human Revolution* achieves a rare accolade: it's not just a great game, but a timely one.

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SNIFF THE DETECTIVE

Jensen doesn't exactly have a winning personality, so it's no great surprise that most people are reticent to help. Cue the persuasion system. Though the facial animation doesn't pip *LA Noire*, *Human Revolution*'s use of body language is effective, with characters backing away defensively or visibly opening up. Once Jensen has a social enhancement augment, he is able to read people's stance, classifying them by personality type, and allowing him to select targeted, pheromone-enhanced responses. We will admit to a certain amount of bafflement with this system: sometimes conversations went horribly awry, and then suddenly turned out in our favour. Could this be a bug or a feature?

Post Script

Interview: **Jonathan Jacques-Belletête**, art director, Eidos Montreal

This section discusses late-game locations and characters, and therefore features spoilers.

The juggling act performed by *Human Revolution*'s environment design is a major triumph. As gameplay spaces, the locations account for multiple styles of play, while doing much to describe credible workplaces or living spaces. The architecture and trappings have their own distinct aesthetic which cleverly evokes the character of its occupiers, and simultaneously nods to the game's broader themes of dangerous futurism, meshing that with accessibly contemporary design mores. We talk to Eidos Montreal's master of pixels (right) about inspirations, internal debates and axed levels.



Did you reference specific architects?
Human Revolution is in the *near* future – it's not 300 years away – so it was very important for us to look at real architectural projects that are either being built now or are going to get built in the next five, ten or 15 years. One of the main architects we looked at was Zaha Hadid. The stuff that she's done and is projected to do is completely out of this world – way crazier than what we have in the game. People are so unaware of architecture, especially in North America, that we had to tone it down. But it's an inspiration. I love her organic shapes and the geometric patterns – you can see that in the upper part of Tai Yong Medical and even the outside look of the LIMB clinic. Scandinavian architecture was a big part of it as well, contrasting that with 20th century North American architecture.

"I find that level designers should be a bit more educated about architecture and how things are built"

We were particularly struck by the antechamber to Zhao Yun Ru's office – ostentatiously large and elaborate, yet empty. Did you try to reflect her personality in the construction of her lair?
Absolutely. The theme of cyber-Renaissance is always attached to the characters and the environment. Zhao Yun Ru is highly pro-augmentation; she's also a huge personality; she's got a huge ego; she's very important – and, in that society, for a woman to have reached that level is quite something. She needs to be an extremely strong person. But she's also very private and secretive. So the big empty hall represents this feeling of grandeur – how big her achievements and ego are – but at the same time she's quite a lonely person. The room is completely bathed in sun from all directions, which doesn't make any sense. You couldn't have sunlight coming from 360 degrees unless you were actually *in* the sun – and that was the idea. She represents that part of the Icarus myth – overindulging in transhumanism technology and getting burnt up.



What's the significance of the triangle motif seen throughout the game – in the polygonal sculptures you find in Zhao Yun Ru's office, Belltower's armour and Sarif's tower?
We researched the golden ratio, the scientific method that Galileo founded and all the Renaissance discoveries in mathematics, geometry, astronomy and perspective – we ended up boiling it down to intricate linework and extracted triangles out of that as the iconography for the game. We ended up putting them everywhere – it resonates with the conspiracy side of *Deus Ex*, too, with the symbol of the pyramid or the All-Seeing Eye of the Illuminati.

Do conflicts arise when it comes to designing levels both as credible living spaces and gameplay areas? Have you ever said: "Look, you can't have an air vent right in the middle of this guy's office – it makes no sense"?
It's so true. Few people realise how hard it is to get a good middle ground. This is going to sound negative, but I find that level designers should be a bit more educated about architecture and how things are built. They would create all these volumes for what they need – say, an important apartment for a character – and I'd go round these spaces and think, 'This makes absolutely no sense'. Obviously level designers are smart, talented people, and they want the proper visuals as much as I do, it's just not their first line of thought. So we'd sit together and I'd try to understand what they need for gameplay and rearrange the volumes so it felt more credible. But it's a bit scary when they ship you their first level design pass and it feels like a *Quake III Arena* level, when it's supposed to be a posh restaurant.

There was some early concept art featuring Montreal's streets – was there originally going to be a third city hub?
There were definitely supposed to be some streets to Montreal. I'm not saying how big this was supposed to be, or if it was actually supposed to be a full city hub, but there were outdoor locations set in one of the most famous neighbourhoods of Montreal, called Plateau. It's got very specific architecture, called triplexes, with twirling exterior staircases made of this old metal. It's very specific to Montreal, and we'd drawn concept art of how those streets would look in 20 or 30 years from now. We even tried them in-game. Walking around them felt quite special – that architecture had never been in a game before and never realised alongside a vision of 2027. It was really cool – but maybe another time!

Driver San Francisco

There have been concept car games, but could this be the first high-concept car game? Ubisoft Reflections' latest racer is given a ludicrous but ultimately rather brilliant twist – a narrative crutch for extravagant mechanics that's no less weird than the metaphysical premise of Life On Mars or Quantum Leap. A nasty prang leaves petrolhead detective John Tanner in a coma, plunging him into an imagined version of San Francisco in which he must thwart the devious plans of his nemesis Jericho, recently broken out of jail. The rules of the road are a little different in this dream state – at any moment, Tanner is able to initiate 'Shift', an out-of-body experience that enables the player to soar high above the city and all its traffic, before swooping upon any vehicle to possess its driver.

Tanner's not immediately aware that he's dreaming, and has to come to terms with his new-found powers while pursuing Jericho – whose devious plot is inspired by the TV reports of his waking-world criminality, which Tanner is unconsciously absorbing from his hospital bed. Obviously the body-swapping mechanics are the real motivation, but Tanner's tall tale has the amicable feel of a Sunday afternoon TV serial, told with a light heart and easy wit. As he jumps between bodies, we dip into incidental stories. A pair of brothers struggling with their college fund find themselves swept up in the dangerous world of street racing; a secretary elopes with her embezzling boss/boyfriend; a man bitten by a 'Colombian dream widow' spider needs a quick shot of adrenaline at the hospital. These vignettes are dispatched with a cheery humour and a dramatic irony as Tanner hurriedly adapts to each new situation, blagging his way through the suspicions of his passengers, who are often baffled by the sudden change in mood of their companion. Even vehicles that aren't plot-critical dish out snippets of conversation, in which Tanner apologises in advance for the imminent insurance claim.

The premise for these diversions: in order to pursue Jericho, Tanner must first help the city, swooping upon mission markers seen from on high to help San Francisco's hapless citizens. Once you've completed enough city missions, the next Jericho mission unlocks, with Tanner hunting down peripheral members of the gang, working his way towards the big cheese himself. Sometimes you'll be cops on a fugitive's tail, sometimes you'll be the fugitives, sometimes the hapless civilians caught in the middle. The hallucinogenic conceit gives *Driver* carte blanche to play with perspective – one mission sees you pursue kidnappers by Shifting to the victim's perspective, popping open the boot so you can see where you are, then Shifting back to the cops on the trail; another has you remotely controlling Tanner's car from the perspective of a would-be assassin. Nightmarish episodes see civilian traffic turn against

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Reflections
Format 360, PC, PS3 (version tested)
Release September


bit.ly/pml6Y7
Extended interview with Martin Edmondson

Tanner's tall tale has the amicable feel of a Sunday afternoon TV serial, told with a light heart and easy wit



you, or feature a desperate pursuit while bolts of lightning send cars flipping in your direction.

The Shift mechanic is deployed with such ingenuity and variety that the game rarely gets stuck with its formula, pushing the possibilities to ever more outlandish effect. Even familiar racing game modes are given a thrilling spin – you're able to tip the odds in your favour by Shifting into oncoming traffic and screeching across the central reservation to smash your leading opponent into the sky. The dreaded escort mission also gets a much-needed shot in the arm, dispatching incoming enemies by turning civilian cars into battering rams.

Whenever you leave the mission-critical vehicle, an autopilot keeps the seat warm for you. It's the game's Achilles' heel: it'll keep pace in the most basic of races, but will reliably fluff more complex missions. You also lose control of your vehicle in the moments following any major crash – the game is so eager to show you cinematic cutaways whenever you total an opposing car that it leaves you careening off into scenery. One mission, with your truck ploughing through countless cop cars, is made exasperating by the frequency with which you're ripped from the wheel. *Driver*'s not above conspicuously loading the dice, either, and this occasionally cheapens the challenge: cops can be maddeningly tenacious as it is, but even if you manage to shake them, the game may decide you haven't had enough and spawn some more right in front of you.

Ultimately, these foibles are easy to ignore, being infrequent and liberally checkpointed, but there remains a low-level scruffiness to parts of the game. The stuttery, slidey animations as pedestrians dive to safety, for example, often clipping through objects to do so; an erratic collision model that sometimes sends touching vehicles into screen-juddering spasms. Otherwise, the game offers sumptuous visual fare, from the lustre of each accurately modelled bonnet to the glorious lighting system. It's adept, too, at flipping between sizzling heatwave saturation and the bleary gloom of Tanner's night-time excursions. And there's the unending marvel of Shifting, fluidly tugging your perspective up, up and away, zipping from ground to cloud level in a moment, the viewpoint encircled by a rippling ethereal shroud.

Simply from a mechanical point of view, Shift is an efficient stand-in for a separate menu interface, obviating the need to laboriously drive between mission markers. By the same token, however, you're slower to learn San Francisco's roadways. Being one of America's more organic cities, with winding hill-roads and snaking overpasses, some missions really require local knowledge for you to nail a route to the ticking clock. And, although the city feels lively and credible enough, there's still the slight bleaching of character that comes



LEFT What wily car chase, winding through alleys full of cardboard boxes, would be complete without the appropriate '70s movie score? *Driver* has slap bass in spades, with a lovingly curated soundtrack. BELOW New levels of Shift unlock over the course of the singleplayer campaign. Each allows you to pull up higher and higher, while the lowest level, seen here, lets you weave among the buildings



ABOVE *Driver* wears its cinematic inspirations on its sleeve, but the point at which cutscene ends and game begins is often cannily concealed. Spooled footage is spliced with realtime action in splitscreen montages





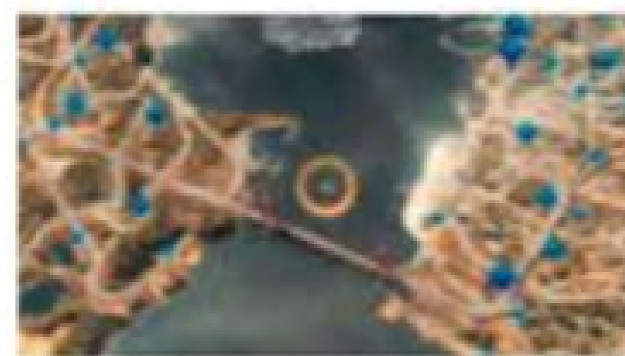
You aren't the only one able to Shift, even in singleplayer. Every vehicle becomes a potential threat, and you nervously eye oncoming lorries, waiting for them to lurch through the crash barrier

To escape the police you need to either total the pursuing cars or leave them behind, initiating a ten-second countdown by escaping a zone marked on the minimap by a red circle. They don't give up easily, though

from stripping out the copyrighted signage. Perhaps a shade of the same criticism could be levelled at the driving model itself. Despite the fact that some race missions drop you into skittish touring cars, bouncy sand buggies and VW Beetles with bizarrely modified suspension, the majority of road vehicles do little to distinguish themselves – perhaps because none of the licensed car brands wanted to advertise strong disparities, perhaps because it would become frustrating if you had to wait for a decent car to trundle along before Shifting down to the desired street.

But you may barely notice this as you dally with the game's ample diversions, all of which remain available for you to explore after the credits roll. There are garages to unlock and cars to buy with the points that you earn through stunts and challenges: pull off a massive drift, or drive into oncoming traffic at speed for a certain amount of time to do so. Impromptu chases are always available – ram a cop car and they'll understandably want a few words; Shift into one and fugitives pop up on the minimap, tempting you to chase.

Then there's multiplayer, too – which proves as chaotic and hilarious an online experience as we've had in recent years. Other car games keep some of this mayhem on-side for when players tire of straight racing; *Driver* puts it centre stage, with Shift creating delirious carnage across all manner of game modes. A favourite is Tag, a mode in which one vehicle accrues points over time until another shunts it and steals the crown. The twist is Shift, of course – at any moment players may plunge via a shimmering bolt to possess oncoming traffic – the car in front or perhaps the truck crossing the intersection just ahead. You can't Shift once you've gained the tag, so keeping a lead means employing



POWER STEERING

Shift isn't the only mystical amendment to Tanner's driving abilities. His dream state boasts the ability to boost his car's speed, in much the same manner as a nitro injection seen in other games. Drawing juice from the same bar, Tanner can also charge up a ram attack – delivering a short burst of speed that reliably annihilates oncoming traffic, so long as you don't overshoot. Boost is placed on the left analogue – a clever risk-reward exacerbated by the overlong, floaty stalk of the DualShock: with your thumb pressed forward, you gain super-acceleration at the expense of responsive control.

demented, paranoid driving, veering down alleys and doing as much to disrupt the expectations of competitors observing from on high.

Other modes suggest that their makers were inspired not by other racers, but by shooters – a genre that better suits the respawn-like Shift mechanic. Capture the flag and Blitz, a base assault gametype, make a surprising appearance – both using Shift as a means to ambush assailants. Trailblazer mode has you vying for position behind the back of a DeLorean as it weaves its way through the city's traffic, while Takedown sees cops hunt criminals, trying to bring them to justice by way of brutal high-speed collisions before the timer runs out. Perhaps one of the most demanding uses of Shift is in Checkpoint Rush, a race in which the only way to score is to be one of the first to zip through a checkpoint, forcing players who fall behind to flip between vehicles, scrabbling up the racetrack in a frantic fight for each gate.

Hear *Driver*'s premise and you may be quick to scoff, but it's a game that earnestly embraces the daft to deliver a mechanical MacGuffin that is as versatile as it is volatile. It sends traditional multiplayer mores into a dizzying spin and, bolstered by a cheery script and amicable tone, creates ever-evolving thrills across the course of the singleplayer campaign. Without it, the game's raw offering of roadways and rides might have struggled, hampered by minor fumbles in presentation and execution, but Shift enables the player to step beyond the rules of racing, and in doing so, thoroughly refreshes them.

8

Post Script

Interview: Martin Edmondson, founder, Ubisoft Reflections

Bullitt's seminal car chase through the streets of San Francisco is a masterpiece of editing, slicing together a hyper-dense version of the city from a collage of shoots across five weeks, often slyly eliding impossible distances or reusing different angles of the same streets. These ten minutes and 53 seconds of vehicular pursuit serve as a major inspiration for the *Driver* series, and its latest instalment mimics the film's clever illusion of continuity in its own editing of the Californian cityscape. Here, **Martin Edmondson** (right) explains in more detail Reflections' mimicry and manipulation of the real.



What sort of things did you have to tweak to make San Francisco suitable for a game?
Quite a lot. This experience has taught us that inch-by-inch recreation of a city for a game is very rarely, if ever, a good idea, certainly in a driving game. In reality the interesting areas are vastly far apart, with a huge swathe of boringness in between them. So what we did was take the key areas, such as downtown, Golden Gate Park Mount Sutro or Marin County, and compress them together. They're laid out according to the real city, but if you're going to go out there with your tape measure it's not like Google Maps. It's a game interpretation. One thing that we did, for example, is widen the roads, because if you try driving around on real San Francisco roads you'll notice they're actually quite narrow. So when you have a game in which you want to do lots of broadside sliding in fairly busy traffic, a lot of the fun disappears if you have narrow streets.

"Making Driver has taught us that inch-by-inch recreation of a city for a game is very rarely, if ever, a good idea"

With the Shift mechanism you don't have to worry about boring the player, because you can Shift into a vehicle on the other side of the city.
Yes, you can. In fact we had a different reason for [compressing the city] and the reason was we wanted a massive player area – we've got 210 miles of drivable road – but we didn't want to invest our artists' time in building areas that had no particular driving or visual interest. We also wanted the player to instantly know where they are in the city, without having to resort to the map. After you've played the game for many hours you know exactly where you are, because the areas all feel very different.



Did you take 3D data from satellite image feed and then refine it, or did you just start work completely from scratch?
We used a standard map as the basis for the layout, but when it came to building it we used a lot of our own research to build the areas from scratch. We tried to put Coit Tower in roughly the right place and make sure that Lombard Street is where it should be, but beyond that it really is a question of making sure that the game flows well and that the roads flow well. So you very quickly abort [using a street-accurate] map once you've got the general layout sorted.

Quite early on in the project, we built quite a considerable amount of the city in terms of the road layout – no buildings, absolutely no terrain. What that showed us when we were building it was that we had our hills and slopes too steep for playability. We had our physics engine up and running early on, and because the roads were so steep the jumps we were doing were just ridiculously enormous. It was too difficult to drive up them without putting crazy amounts of clutch power on the car. So what we did was scale down the height of the entire city. That was difficult to foresee – you had to actually have the physics and the world-driveable geometry in there to really experience it and find out that actually this didn't play as well as it should do.

What sort of trickery is going on to make it possible to zoom from the tarmac to the sky near instantly?
A hell of a lot of trickery! This game's been in development for four-and-a-half years, and although it's not the only reason we've taken a long time, all that core game engine stuff is proprietary Reflections tech, built from the ground up. We need to be able to, for example, drive to the very top of Nob Hill and see right across the Bay. San Francisco is a very challenging city to do in a videogame at high framerates, because of the fact that it has hills and you can't occlude things. You have to draw everything you can see, if you don't want to do foggy – which we didn't.

We wanted to be able to use the location properly so that the player can see Golden Gate all the way over there, or see the Trans-America Tower in the distance over there. When you pull all the way out you see the whole city – all 210 miles of road – and you can see the whole of downtown and Marin and Sutro and everything. That's the city model that you're driving in. Obviously that's with a lower level of detail, because you're so high you don't need to be drawing every single railing on every building – but it is the same city. And that was key to what we wanted to do, as was 60 frames per second. If you take game engines off the shelf, they're very easy to use and very flexible, but because of that they have certain inherent performance limitations compared to when you absolutely tailor things to specifically what you need. [In our case] it involves a lot of machine code on the SPU and really crazy stuff we haven't been doing since the old days. I mean, the PlayStation and the Xbox are absolutely smoking to bring the performance for this game. ■

Xenoblade Chronicles

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Monolith Soft
Format Wii
Release Out now

X*enoblade Chronicles* begins in much the same way as its spiritual grandfather, the seminal Japanese RPG *Xenogears*, did some 13 years ago. No sooner have you settled into the shoes of your protagonist, learned the layout of his pastoral neighbourhood and met the friendly faces that comprise his community in Colony 9, than everything around you is destroyed in a gigantic robot attack.

Director Tetsuya Takahashi, a designer whose credits include pivotal JRPGs such as *Final Fantasy V*, *Chrono Trigger* and *Secret Of Mana*, has never shied away from wrapping a player in a narrative comfort blanket before setting fire to it. And here it's an exceptionally well-executed way of grabbing your attention while providing an immediate motivation to dive into a 60-hour winding epic, the likes of which have long fallen out of fashion.

However, Monolith Soft's efforts to urge players to reconsider the beleaguered JRPG extend far deeper than the opening moments of the plot. No game released in the genre in the past decade has demonstrated such a concerted focus as this breezy journey to redefine and repopularise the genre by learning from past mistakes. It cherry-picks ideas from a variety of creative trees, taking *World Of Warcraft*'s moreish mission structure and coupling it with *Final Fantasy XII*'s clockwork battle system and *Dragon Quest IX*'s rewarding character customisation before seasoning these with a wealth of its own ideas. And the concoction blends in a coherent way, never feeling like a tribute so much as a bold, singular statement of its own.

In part that is thanks to the world, the handsome land of Bionis upon which your character, Shulk, and his people the Homs reside. It's a triumph of architectural design and landscaping, the line of sight through each passageway and across every field carefully considered and injected with drama and intrigue. Monolith pushes the Wii architecture to the point that, perched atop a rocky outcrop, gazing down upon miles of terrain and a city of pinprick residents in the distance, it can be difficult to believe that this game is married to Nintendo's console.

A carpet of tall grass covers the ground, swaying on a breeze that carries butterflies upon it, juxtaposed with the hulking Mechon, the bipedal robot force terrorising the land. By removing all invisible walls, the world has a sense of true place – even if freedom comes with responsibility, since you can easily plunge to your death over a cliff. The decision to reward the player with experience points just for happening upon new areas, while ingenious and welcome, is an unnecessary system to inspire exploration; this world does that all by itself.

Where *Xenogears* was a game of tortured brilliance, never quite marrying its story and world to its mechanics, *Xenoblade Chronicles* enjoys tight coherence benefiting from Takahashi's singular vision for scenario and setting but also from a group of innovative systems that purr beneath the plot. In battle you control just one character. To attack, you simply need to position that character close enough to an enemy to strike, which it will do automatically. Your inputs, then, are almost entirely limited to deciding which special attacks to execute and when. These 'arts' can be used at any time, but have a cooling-off period before they can be reused, and knowing when to trigger offensive, defensive and healing arts, or more general buffs and de-buffs, is the strategic key to success.

A party gauge fills slowly as you work together, allowing you to issue chain-link commands when filled, stopping time and queuing arts from each character. Meanwhile, Shulk's sword imbues him with the power to see into the future, and occasionally the flow of battle will be interrupted to show you a special move your opponent is due to make soon, allowing you a few moments to prepare a counter or pre-emptive healing spell.

Battles take place in the main environment, where enemies can be clearly seen and avoided if necessary. Happily, many creatures in the world won't bother you if they aren't of a hostile disposition, or if your team is too strong for them, and so, in contrast to many other JRPGs, there's an ecosystem at work here, and Bionis is a pleasant, diverse place to roam as a result. The influence of western MMOGs can also be felt in the side-quest structure, which sees you taking on as many missions as you can carry. Rather than taking the form of fetch quests, often these missions will be automatically cleared when the criteria are fulfilled, with no need to return to the quest giver to claim your rewards.

The story is fast-paced and engaging, with regular set-pieces to reward investment. A strong, characterful translation from Nintendo helps enormously, while the all-British voice cast gives the game's key characters an uncommon, fresh tone. But the greatest triumph is that, unusually for a JRPG, many of the best stories in the game aren't prescribed, but instead generated by your own inquisitiveness.

Wonders and terrors are equally positioned in the world to imbue even the slightest diversion off the beaten track with drama and anticipation. When married to one of the strongest battle systems in the genre and a cast of characters and story that twist convention, this world becomes irresistible. It's a potent return to form for Takahashi, then, a glowing comeback for the Japanese RPG, and an injection of creativity for some tired hardware. *Xenoblade Chronicles* manages to impress, enrich and, best of all, inspire wonder.

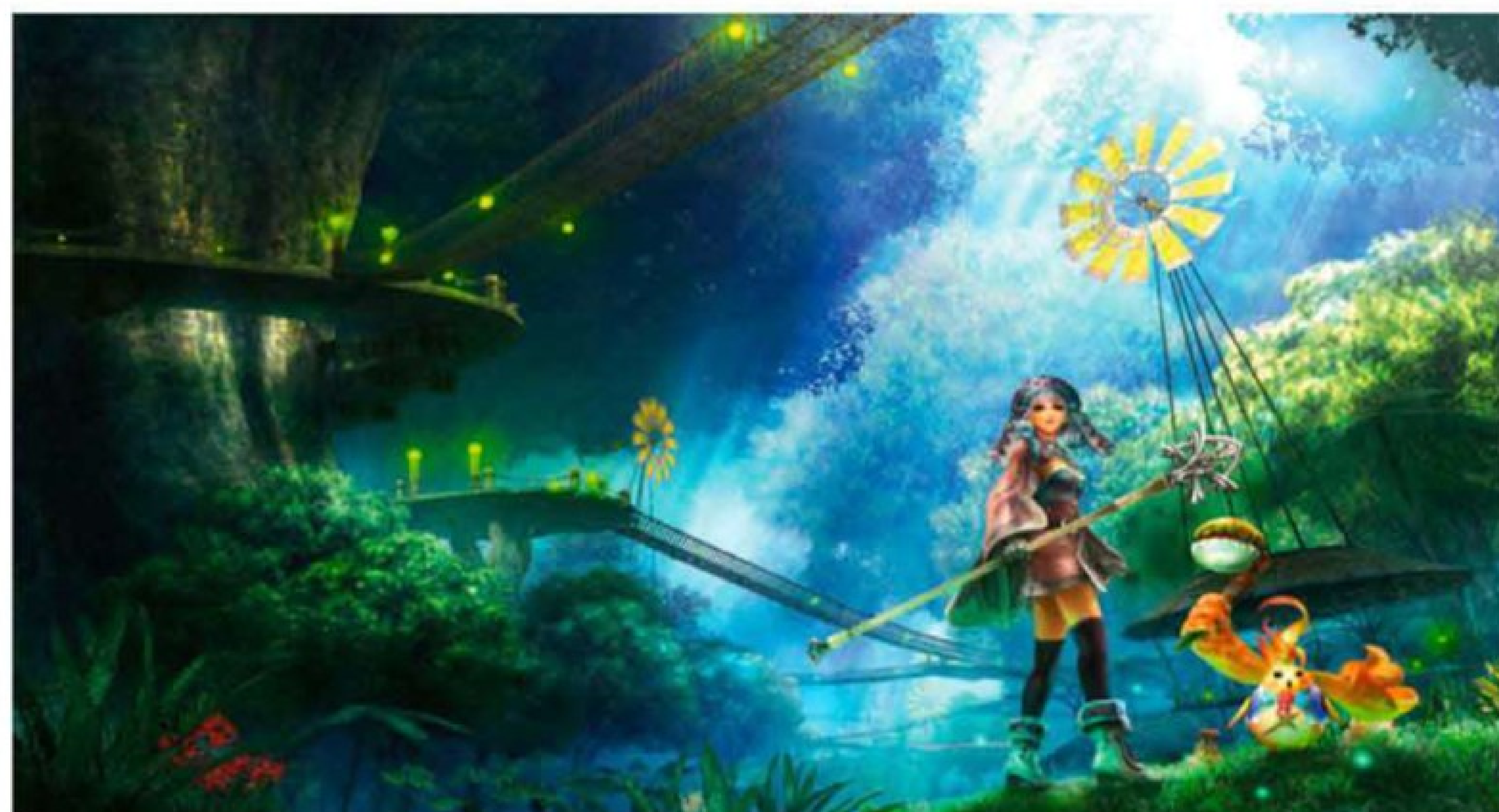
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Unusually for a JRPG, many of the game's best stories aren't prescribed, but generated by your own inquisitiveness



ALL THAT GLISTERS
Every scene is littered with gleaming points of light. These represent collectable items that can be harvested to complete objectives or used as tradable goods in the shops. In contrast to adventure games' stock treasure chests, with their laboured opening animations, you simply run through these items to add them to your inventory, and since they often contain valuable objects, collecting all of them can prove irresistible. The collector is further baited by an in-game sticker book, which can be filled in as you acquire new items. Complete the set and you're rewarded with a crystal which can slot into your weaponry to increase its potency.





ABOVE At points in battle you'll be asked to press a button on cue, successful execution triggering a rallying battle cry, giving your team an experience point boost. **LEFT** While the world is huge, a journey across it is quick and easy, since you can fast-travel to any landmark you have discovered so far, making dashes back to the town shop a click and a whirr away

BELOW The lavish environments come at the cost of detail on the character models – especially their faces, which are impressionistic at best. The strong animation conveys emotion nonetheless



ABOVE *Xenoblade*'s world is rich with creatures great and small, and the designers have placed monsters far beyond your team's ability in early environments. Thankfully, enemy levels can be easily checked before battle





Xenoblade is a remarkable-looking game by any standards, more so when you consider it runs on modest hardware

Post Script

How a single decision informed a whole game's worth of improvements

Xenoblade Chronicles' director Tetsuya Takahashi made a crucial decision at the outset of the game's development to forgo the protracted, interruptive cutscenes that embellished and eventually sank his earlier work. Ahead of the game's Japanese release, he's reported to have said that the cutscene-heavy approach of his previous titles was a "dead end", and that ensuring story never got in the way of the game was his fresh creative vision for the future.

Takahashi's inability to rein in his narrative ambition in previous projects meant that, inevitably, the money ran out on both PS1 game *Xenogears* – whose second disc was essentially a series of placeholder cutscenes – and his later PS2 *Xenosaga* series, which was brought to an abrupt end after just three of the six intended instalments.

That his lesson has been learned is clear for all to see in this latest epic. While *Xenoblade Chronicles* is far from light on narrative – composer Yasunori Mitsuda blanched at the dialogue before putting pen to manuscript – there's a temperance at work here that prioritises game over cinematic in clear and beneficial ways.

One key strength of this new approach is the way in which Takahashi forces his team to show, not tell, players the bedrock mythology of *Xenoblade*'s universe. The director's obvious flair for world-building and his dizzying attention to detail is given room to breathe, resulting in more subtle, and ultimately more effective, communication.

The success of Takahashi's approach is best demonstrated by the physical design and dimensions of the world itself. In the beginning, according to the game's opening scenes, two gods fought a seemingly eternal battle until both were dealt mortal blows and left immobilised. The camera pulls upwards following this prologue to reveal that, centuries later, these two colossi, overgrown with moss, reeds and lakes, form the world on which the Homs reside.

The premise is far from a gimmick, and dictates the very nature and layout of the game world; the setup of *Xenoblade* is carried through with a dedication and coherence only the greats of the genre achieve. The setting of the gargantuan Bionis is a vertical domain as well as a horizontal one, stretching high overhead. Mile-long mossy walkways extend at jutting diagonals while lifts and spiral walkways take your party from one 'body part' to the next. The sheer scale of the world means it's not immediately apparent what part of the god you are treading upon, but clues in the scenery, combined with a slow-building mind-map of the world, soon begin to bring the anatomy into sharp focus.

Stare out from a cliff ledge into the hazy distance and you'll pick out the form of the other colossus reaching into the sky, red eyes glaring like angry moons on the horizon. Midway through the game your party sets off through the craggy heart of Bionis, a metaphor turned literal in what is one of the most unnerving excursions in the game.

The world is an ever-present character in the game and while (in contrast to the mossy giants of *Shadow Of The Colossus*) the host upon whose back you scramble is inanimate, its presence is strong and conspicuous. It tells a more engaging story in shape and contour than could have been delivered in mere words, and is proof that Takahashi's revised approach has led to focus and a return to creative form.

It's testament to the director's humility, then, that having ploughed a design furrow yielding only limited results, he felt confident enough to change his approach entirely, reining in cutscenes in favour of letting the world (and its mechanics) do the talking. And it's testament to this wisdom that *Chronicles* delivers one of the most striking realms yet seen in the medium, one that dwells in the memory just as it towers in the stratosphere of its host hardware's technical capacity. ■

Ryu Ga Gotoku: Of The End

Publisher Sega
Developer In-house
Format PS3
Release Out now (Japan)

Ryu Ga Gotoku: Of The End is a game that takes a well-established, five-game franchise (entitled *Yakuza* in the west) that's characterised, fundamentally, by realism – by seedy neon cityscapes, sleazy hostess bars, gritty violence, tattooed gangsters and overwrought drama full of honour and betrayal – and adds fundamentally, comprehensively, completely unrealistic zombies. So perhaps the most surprising thing about it is that there aren't more surprises.

Sure, there are moments that make you jump. Like any self-respecting zombie apocalypse sim, *Of The End* knows exactly when to be unfair. It knows exactly when to allow shambling corpses to break into a sprint, exactly when to spring a sudden swarm of them right behind you, and exactly when to open a door to reveal a massed throng of undead, every one of them intent on scooping out the inside of your cranium and eating it.

It steers its way through the massed ranks of the living dead without ever really diverging too far from the path taken from the previous games in the series. Somehow, it still finds time for those hostess bars, labyrinthine side-streets and a multitude of minigames and sub-quests. Indeed, it's that very absence of surprise that testifies so clearly to the very tangible presence of videogame genius. Seasoned fans of *Ryu Ga Gotoku* will already have seen it all, whether it's panty-snatching superheroes or over-elaborate combat mechanics. So the addition of preternaturally pallid ambulatory corpses and the resurrection of machine-gun-armed previously-dead villains is just par for the course (although taking the machine-gunner out on the golf course or off for a spot of fishing is entirely optional). Zombies are simply the only logical next step in the story of Kazuma Kiryu and co.

Nevertheless, for anyone expecting the sort of slick, fast, duck hunt that you might encounter in any one of the game's zombie rivals like *Left 4 Dead* or *Dead Island* (see p66), the clunky controls and oddly segmented shooting sections are initially a little bit disappointing. Combat is ringfenced from the adventure parts of the game – literally, by barriers constructed by the military to contain the infestation. So at first it feels oddly spliced in, and serviceable at best (thanks, especially, to a camera which snaps, confusingly, to the character's perspective rather than the player's).

As the game progresses, however, certain subtleties emerge. The undead ecology gradually extends its ranks to expose you to a variety of unliving peril that interact well with each other: the first time you encounter the zippy, snappy little skate-zombies they're a decent challenge; eventually they become routine fodder, until they regain their bite when they're joined by slowly lumbering giants or banshee-screaming harridans. Boss battles, meanwhile, are much more like set-pieces than in previous *Ryu Ga Gotoku* games – sitting in a tank blasting concrete-clad behemoths, or ducking in and out of cover to avoid the rasping, stretchy tongue of a wall-hugging reptile, for example – and they often give a knowing wink to other classic zombie horror titles. And, of course, *Ryu Ga Gotoku* wouldn't be *Ryu Ga Gotoku* without a quirky new game mechanic, in this case a sort of bullet-time QTE that allows you to cause environmental damage – taking out a gas tank in slow-motion, for example, or removing a control panel to set electrical currents sparking across a corridor to relieve your brain-dead assailants of their unlife.

Ambulatory corpses and the resurrection of machine-gun-armed previously-dead villains is par for the course



Even if, looked at objectively, the combat in *Of The End* occasionally approaches average, the game's saving grace – as in previous games – is the framework that wraps it up. This is not a game that confines itself to the curse of the undead; it continues to range widely through city streets that are full of minigames, occasional silliness, random acts of kindness and interesting characters. So when you're done dealing with the city's undead menace, you're always free to follow other gangsterly pursuits like wooing big-haired escorts over drinks, hanging out at the arcades, stopping off for a few frames at the bowling alley or just wandering the streets running errands for people (though that usually involves braving the infested areas of the city again). While shooting zombies in the head is undoubtedly fun, then, it's made more so by the sub-missions, the distractions, the characters and, of course, the opportunity to take to familiar streets that are wrecked and torn into unfamiliar shapes.

If that sounds a bit like 'this one's for the fans', perhaps it is, a little bit. But while *Of The End* is a game that rewards prior experience, it doesn't require it. Even if you're unfamiliar with the previous adventures of Shun Akiyama you can still enjoy his current ones and be amused by his relationship with his secretary; you don't need to know who Goro Majima is to enjoy his improbable snakeskin suit and eye patch. So if you're not a fan by now, it's as good a place as any to start. And, perhaps, finish. Because the game does also pose the question: where next for *Ryu Ga Gotoku*?

After travelling back in time in *Kenzan*, donning snazzy leisurewear for its forays on PSP, popping over to Okinawa in the third game and going all multi-character in the fourth; after selling tie-in noodles, sponsoring real-world booze and setting up real-life dates with hostess girls, the creators of *Ryu Ga Gotoku* will have to do something special to raise the stakes beyond the zombie apocalypse. In their current condition, it looks like the streets of Kamurocho lack the infrastructure to support any more adventures. But for now, *Of The End* is a worthwhile climax to a franchise that contained multitudes. These are the same mean streets you know and love. With zombies.

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RIGHT The shambling corpses of infected innocents aren't the only things to return from the dead. *Ryu Ga Gotoku 2*'s Ryuji Goda also makes a return, except with a hand that turns into a machine-gun.
BELOW In case you were in any doubt about who the bad guys are here – whether it's the flesh-eating, mindless automatons, or the drug-running criminal gangsters and pimps – here's a helpless schoolgirl to help you make up your mind





ABOVE There's pleasure to be had from mowing down the massed ranks of the living dead with Ryuji Goda's machine-gun hand, but snapping off headshots using a pistol remains just as effective – and entertaining



Goro Majima takes out the teeming hordes with a shotgun, before going on to perform some truly awful karaoke. Just two facets of the game's constellation of tones, moods and minigames

Insanely Twisted Shadow Planet

Publisher Microsoft Studios
Developer Shadow Planet Productions
Format 360
Release Out Now

The art sparkles, and the title works a peculiar kind of over-wrought magic. Beyond that, however, *Insanely Twisted Shadow Planet* all too often becomes a carnival of quiet miscalibration. Play it if you want to see a well-known formula rigorously applied – albeit with few signs that the original design's deeper nuances have been understood. Travel its intestinal hallways to watch the *Castlevania* template sluggishly transformed from a gripping tale of exploration via gradual empowerment into a drearier story depicting the slow levelling up of a locksmith.

Before all that, however, it's worth spending at least a little more time on the art, since it's confident, atmospheric, and the game's obvious highlight. That's something of an achievement, too. This particular blend of high-colour backdrops and complex silhouette is the same graphical style that left Ubisoft's *Outland* looking a bit like a herbal remedies advert. Here, though, it's a design that really fits, sculpting the toxic wilds of *Shadow Planet* in a bold and distinctly European manner, while allowing your own imagination just enough room to fill in the blanks for itself.

After launching from a tiny domed space fortress, your dinky flying saucer zips towards a menacing alien world seemingly constructed out of corkscrews and forks. The outer crust is wriggling with tendrils and Halloween tree roots, while the inner layers are filled with mechanised torture chambers and huge beasts with glowing weak spots. The deeper you delve, the harder the art team works to put its own inventive spin on everything from ancient circuitry and spooky underground grottos to more familiar genre elements like earth, wind and fire, and it's a great place for a flying visit. An area built of cogs is riddled with rising and falling pistons and spinning escapements, whereas the inclusion of the inevitable ice stage is largely redeemed by a paper-cut storybook approach that revels in sharp edges and broad expanses of flat colour. It's science fiction by way of Ezra Jack Keats.

The game itself is often a little harder to enjoy. An exploration adventure that handles like *Robotron 2084* but thinks like *Metroid*, your job is to move through a gradually unfolding map that opens up a little more with each new tool you discover. It's a simple enough formula to hack together, but on the occasions when it has really worked, the genius of it has generally been found in the balancing. In *Super Metroid*, the items being added to Samus' suit come with a tantalising sense of power to them: they're gadgets you can't wait to try out on both enemies and the environments alike – dangerous toys that are exciting as well as useful. *Shadow Planet*'s add-ons, in comparison, are often wimpish and bland. Pretty keys for pretty doors, you can expect to wield the likes of a toothless circular saw, a sickly Van de Graaf generator, and even a flighty spin on *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun. Selecting your loadout is handled smartly, with a responsive radial menu and the ability to assign face buttons for quick access but, even when taken as a whole, your arsenal lacks the punch of a single one of Samus' rockets.

Even when taken as a whole, your arsenal lacks the punch of a single one of Samus Aran's rockets

The environmental challenges, meanwhile, focus all too frequently on basic drudgery. After an excellent early boss battle that blends maze puzzles with sharp shooting and pattern recognition to spectacular effect, the game's creativity sputters and seems to choke, and what remains are entire levels based around awkward and unsatisfying mechanics. That ice stage becomes an opportunity to redirect laser beams through kinked passageways by means of crystals wielded by your craft's endlessly fumbling claw attachment. The water environment is in thrall to truly wretched slow-motion, steerable rockets with controls designed for pinwheeling frustration. Worst of all, the electrical zone may have the good dramatic sense to turn out the lights and leave you fighting unthinkable Lovecraftian horrors in the dark, but it also has a nature sufficiently quotidian to ensure that, while you do all that, you're also nannying a spark plug from one socket to the next in order to inch yourself forward.

It can be enjoyable, because the maps are tightly bunched, the save points are unusually well spaced, and – every now and then – the developer really nails a set-piece, but the challenges regularly struggle to match the astonishing impact of the art style. This is a game in which the design cleverness has mostly been spent on the menus and the interface; a game that looks the business even as it gently sends you to sleep.

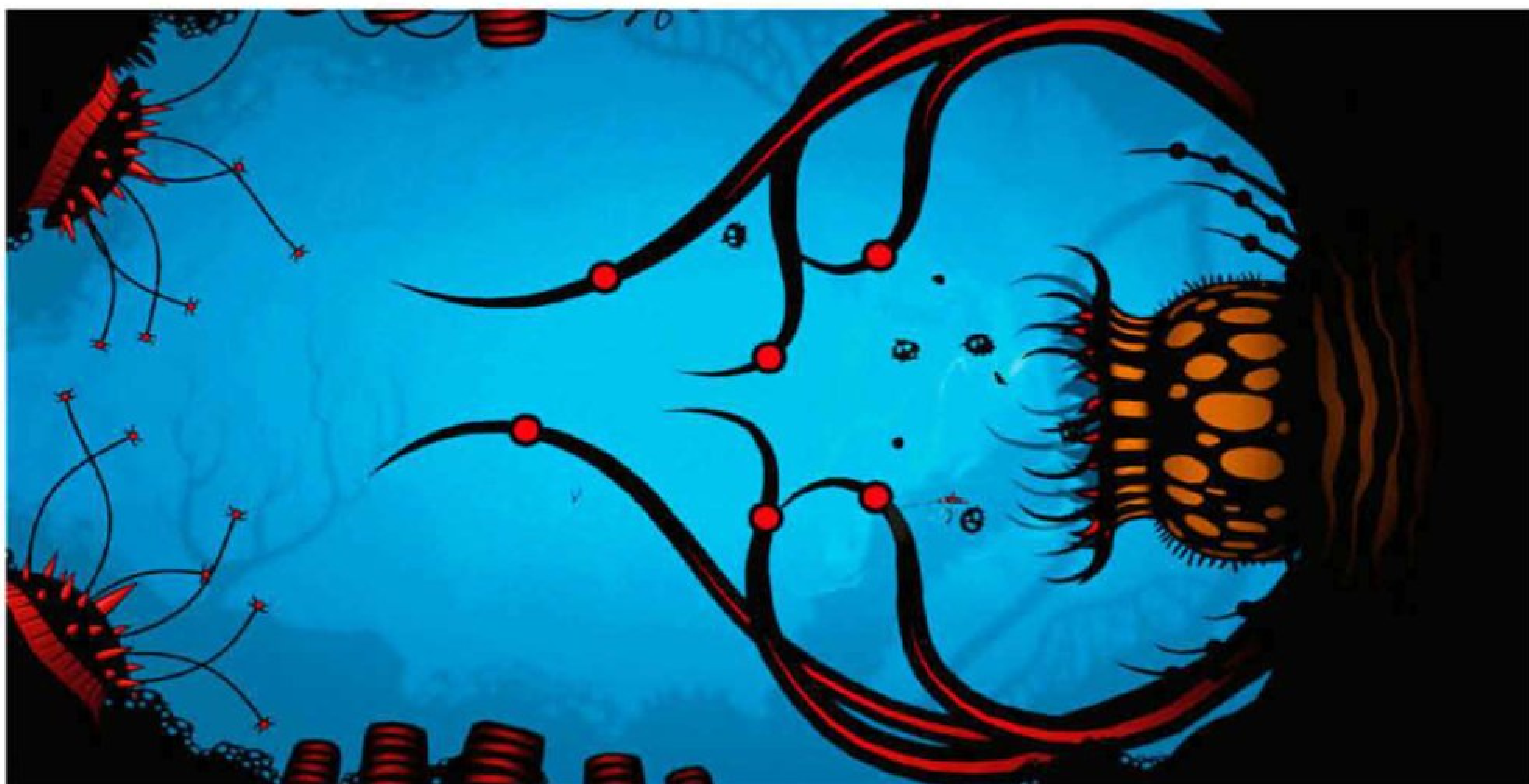
In the end, it's left to the multiplayer gauntlets to jolt you back to life again. Played with friends, *Shadow Planet* becomes a frantic egg-and-spoon race that sees you keeping lanterns lit as you dash through a series of randomly arranged arenas, seeking to stay one step ahead of a mass of tentacled horror that is forever headed your way. Enemy attack waves and environmental hurdles suddenly come into sharp focus under the mode's constant time pressure, while victory lies with a strategic approach to power-ups, and clever micro-management of weapons and carrying-claw.

Left to your own devices, however, plodding through the main campaign can be a far more sober experience: it's convoluted rather than challenging, and its bid for echoing loneliness only manages to capture a sense of rattling emptiness instead. *Insanely Twisted Shadow Planet* is a beautiful disappointment – a great look in search of a great game to go with it. The genre template may be rock solid, but the end result is an adventure that's been strung across a fault line. On one side, it's an elegant science fantasy; on the other, it's just another pretty form of toil.

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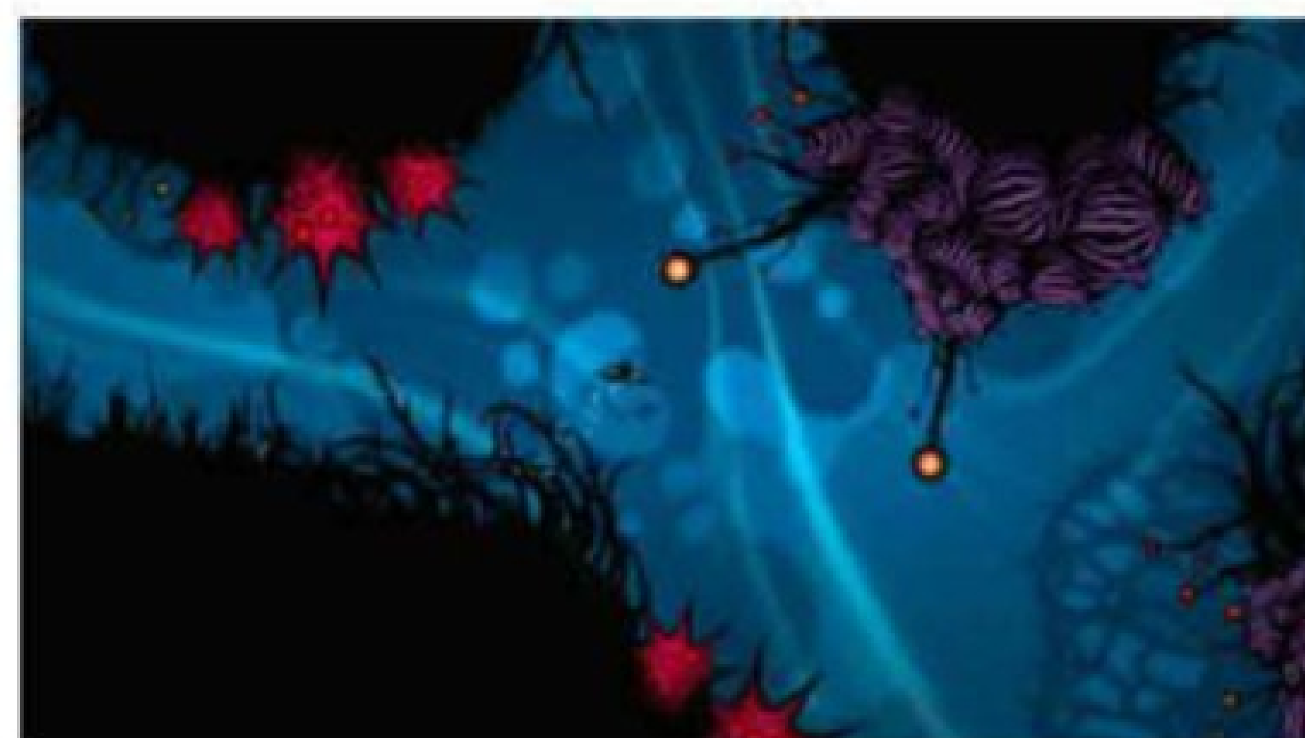


MUSIC OF THE SPHERES
Unlikely as it may initially seem, Insanely *Twisted Shadow Planet's* frantic orchestral score is the creation of Norwegian black metal band Dimmu Borgir, an outfit more commonly associated with greasepaint and spiked trousers than dreamy puzzles and quiet exploration. The soundtrack is brilliant stuff, bringing a faint tinge of '50s saucer paranoia to proceedings with its blasting horns and scurrying strings, and it's only a shame that the game holds it back as a treat to accompany the rare cinematics, while opting for more ambient clicks, swoops and buzzing during the rest of the game.



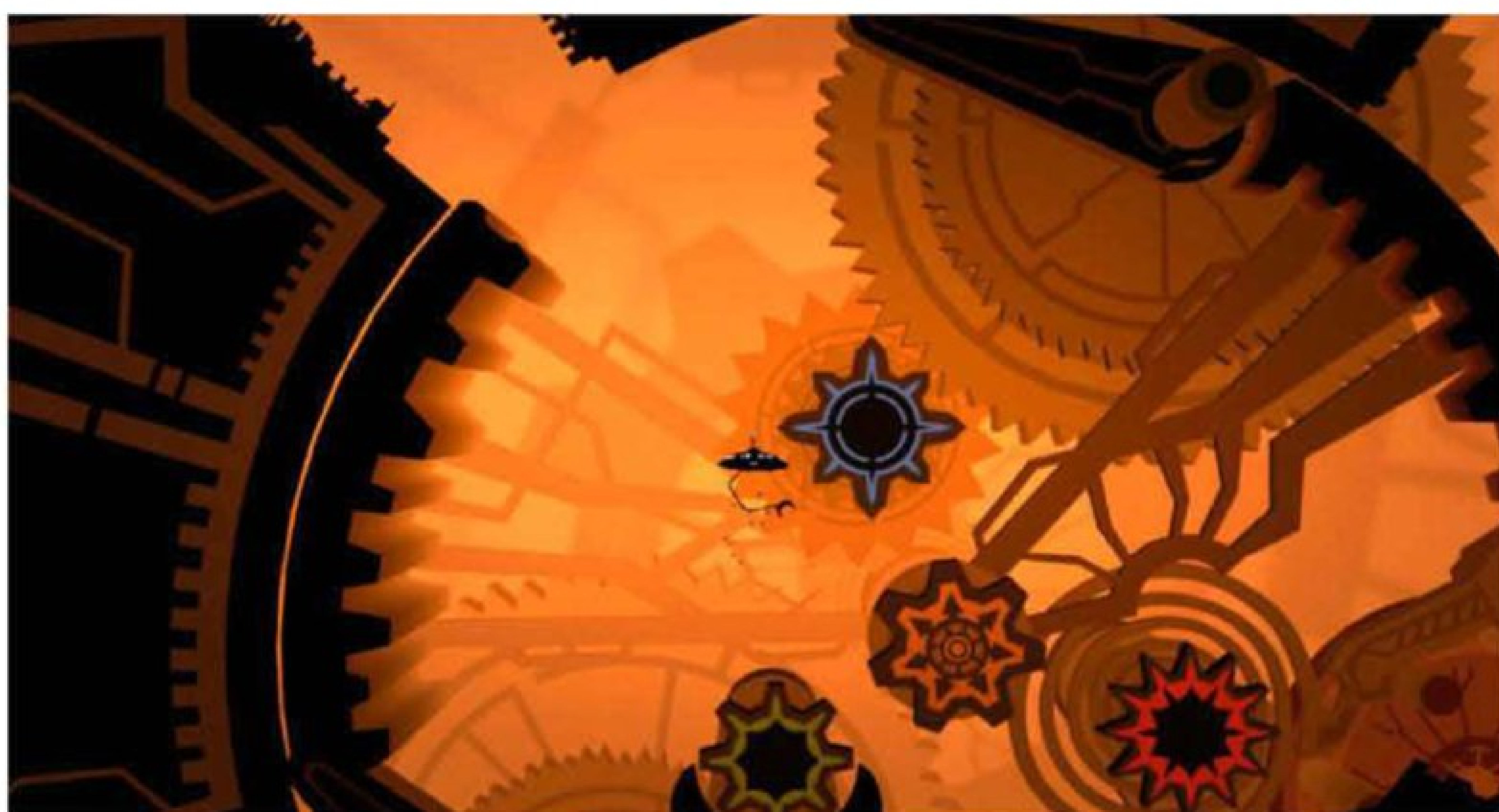
ABOVE Bosses range from the inspired to the insipid, deteriorating in quality as the game proceeds, starting off with a couple of potential classics and ending with a dull three-form monstrosity





ABOVE The game's map cleverly avoids the need for undue backtracking. There's an Achievement to be gained for uncovering every nook and cranny, but the loot you'll gain doing it is largely limited to power-ups

ABOVE Enemies tend to be flighty and annoying, pecking your health away before they fall to your lasers. **RIGHT** The claw is beautifully animated, and excellent for pulling rocks out of the way, but performs miserably when it comes to the fine work some later puzzles require



Age Of Empires Online

When **Chris Taylor**'s Gas Powered Games took over development duties on *Age Of Empires Online* in early 2011, it felt like Albert Einstein giving up on the unified field theory to open a doughnut shop. Taylor is best known as the creator of *Supreme Commander*, a vast, stubborn and mentally demanding strategy game. By comparison, *Age Of Empires Online* is aiming to be a sugary snack; a cute, colourful, free to play crowd-pleaser.

To understand it, you have to look at comments Taylor made in 2007 about why games need to be more like mowing the lawn. "When I ride the lawnmower, I don't think about steering and cutting grass. I think about life. I think about work. I recharge. That's what I think gaming needs to be. Do you want your entire Saturday to be laying around or to be about working, or would you rather a combination of both? I'm striving for that in my next designs. To create a balance of energy output and energy input."

Age Of Empires Online strives for that balance and just barely fails. When you play it, you don't only think about fighting tiny wars, gathering resources and levelling. You think about life, you think about work, you think about how you're a touch bored.

You begin by picking between Greeks and Egyptians, the two races included at launch. From there, you're taken to your home city. This is where you'll receive missions, and expand the city by levelling up, unlocking new technology and constructing new buildings. Imagine a Facebook city-building game minus the gurning faces at the bottom of the screen, but with the same relaxing compulsion to expand and tidy its gleeful cartoon world.

Your first mission is to stop an attack on a nearby town. It takes about three minutes, and after you've learnt to move troops and killed the enemy, you're rewarded with XP, gold and an Empire point.

The next mission, then, is to unlock something on the tech tree using that Empire point. This takes three clicks and rewards you with yet more XP and gold. These are only tutorial missions, but the following 15 hours of the game are the same. You'll defend a base against an enemy assault, sail across oceans to rescue hostages, and race against the clock in challenge maps, all while *Age Of Empires Online* hands out presents like Santa Claus drunk on peach schnapps at his own birthday party.

The game's biggest failing is that while the mission goals change, your choices never do, even as you unlock new buildings and units. Each mission starts with a town square, a couple of houses, and five or six villagers. You gather food, wood, gold and stone, use those to train more villagers, and construct buildings that build military units, grow food, research better skills and increase your population cap.

Publisher Microsoft
Developer Gas Powered Games
Format PC
Release Out now

Imagine a Facebook city-building game minus the gurning faces, but with the same relaxing compulsion



WEALTH OF NATIONS
Age Of Empires Online launches with the Greek and Egyptian races, both of which can be upgraded to premium versions if you've got the Microsoft Points. If you do upgrade, you gain access to different, and better, gear and units, along with new missions and ranked PVP matches. There are plans to add Celtic and Persian races later, but you can also spend your money on two other types of content. There are Booster packs which offer new features or storylines, like the forthcoming Defense Of Crete, and which give exclusive item rewards upon completion, and there are Empire Extras that offer new cosmetic items for your capital city.

Once you've amassed a large enough force, you right-click on the enemy base, or special unit, or whatever you fancy attacking, and repeat until you win. A dozen units exist, covering both land and sea, and varied between the two races, each with customisable equipment, but in the first 15 hours you never have to think tactically to win. Sometimes it's easy, and sometimes it takes longer. Only a cooperative partner – which most of the missions are good enough to allow – keeps the levelling interesting.

The constant rewards never make the inevitable victory satisfying, either. There's a lot of *stuff* to earn in *Age Of Empires Online*, including buildings for your home city, buildings for missions, technologies, units, gear for those units, crafting recipes, special powers and more, but there's rarely an interesting decision to be made as a result.

The tech tree is split into Economy, Military and Utility upgrades and then further divided across Ages unlocked by levelling up, but you don't feel like you're shaping your army or play style with the choices you make. An early Age 2 ability lets you build military boats, but so what? Most maps are too small to have much water to begin with, and maps that require them give you the boats at the start anyway.

A free-to-play game like *League Of Legends* is engaging because the next skill for your character sounds exciting and fun, and sometimes like a whole new way to play the game. *AOEO* never embraces such wild changes because it doesn't want you to ever have to think too hard about anything.

It's also not long before a mission lends you a premium unit, so you can see how it feels, and then rewards you with an item only those who've paid for the premium content can use. That item will sit in your inventory, taunting you with its superior stats, until either you pay for the premium race or dare to throw it away to make space.

These are dirty tricks, but it's still hard to fault a game that offers so much for free. Unless you're hoping to compete on equal footing in the PVP mode, there's no brick wall of difficulty that requires a premium item to climb over.

Instead of a highly modern, free-to-play strategy game, *AOEO* ends up succeeding as a mid-'90s throwback to something like Blue Byte's *The Settlers*. It's never worse than pleasant, and the evergreen villages, the jaunty swagger of its cows and donkeys and the peaceful expansion of your city are exactly the kind of recharging experiences Taylor talked about providing four years ago. It's only a shame that the repetition, and a lack of anything to look forward to, mean that you eventually realise your grass still needs to be cut.

6





LEFT Egypt and Greece are similar in a lot of missions and unit types, but one of the early differences is Egypt's Priestess of Ra. She increases productivity by worshipping at buildings and can heal nearby friendly units



ABOVE Each unit has its own strengths: ranged units are good against other ranged units, spearmen are good against cavalry, and so on. But there's never any reason to do anything other than get lots of everything and point them straight at the enemy.
RIGHT Later missions can take longer to complete, but there's no way to save mission progress. Worse, if you pause the game and leave it for too long, it logs you out. This is the sort of thing PC gamers have nightmares about



Star Fox 64 3D

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Nintendo EAD/Q-Games
Format 3DS
Release September 9

At first, it is as if scales are falling from your eyes. Fourteen years ago, no little imagination and faith were required to picture *Star Fox 64*'s rough polygons as an approximation of 3D, but now it is a reality: Fox McCloud and chums really are flying into the screen.

As with the recent *Ocarina Of Time* remake, *Star Fox 64 3D* has been given a graphical overhaul, the original's jaggy textures replaced with smoother, higher-resolution equivalents. Audio, too, has been refined, Koji Kondo's soundtrack clearer, those fuzzy 1997 speech samples cleaned up – though the latter serve as a reminder of why Nintendo games so rarely feature voice acting. Fox's stilted delivery is especially jarring, and the extra clarity renders the eminently punchable Slippy Toad's hyperactive, shrill blathering more annoying than ever.

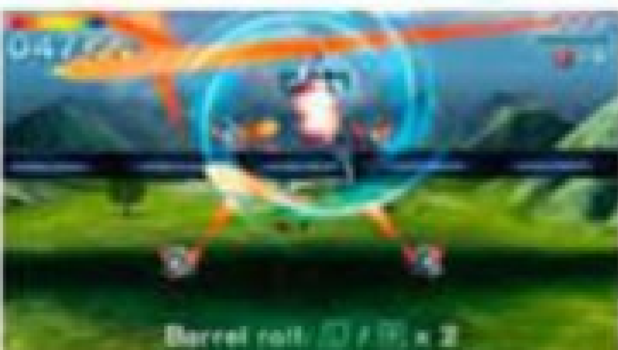
Joint developers Nintendo EAD and PixelJunk studio Q-Games have made use of the 3DS gyroscope to allow players to control Fox's Arwing by tilting the system itself. It works as you'd expect, but may be a source of too much embarrassment to suit the commute, and the subsequent pitch, roll and yaw of the 3DS hardware is, at first, a headache waiting to happen. Once your eyes become accustomed to the shifting 3D sweet spot, it plays the role of the right stick: fly the Arwing with the circle pad and make minor adjustments to the aiming reticule with gentle tilts of the system.

Most striking of all is the realisation that this is a game perfectly suited to portable play. Levels last minutes, a complete playthrough barely an hour, and the branching map requires players to fulfil certain conditions – save a teammate, fly through a series of rings – to unlock different routes. When completed, these often change the rest of the level and its boss, and working out which route yields the highest score (see 'Lylat scores') encourages repeated play.

It's not perfect: with 3D on, your reticule is too often obscured by the Arwing itself, and a slavish faithfulness to the source material means 1997's occasional pop-in and clipping returns. The brand-new multiplayer mode offers only local fourplayer battles via Download Play, with no online component at all, a lamentable omission in a game so heavily based on high scores.

As with *Ocarina*, at first there is a rush of nostalgia. As it fades, it's replaced by the realisation that, in many ways, the original was the playable prototype and this is the true final product, a fantastic fit both for the hardware's portability and feature set. No cash-in or release schedule stop-gap, this is an excellent update of Nintendo's classic space opera.

8



LYLAT SCORES

The game's longevity lies in Score Attack mode. As with the best shoot 'em ups, levels become memory tests as you endlessly tweak routes and firing strategies, maximising scores by catching enemies in the blast radius of charged laser homing missiles. Bombs, which deal damage to all enemies onscreen, are detonated on impact or by a second button press, adding a further layer of complexity to proceedings.



There are occasional reminders of the original's flaws. None is more obvious than Solar: the planet's swells of lava constantly depleting your energy are a niggling distraction from the finely tuned scoring system

The Baconing

Publisher Hothead Games
Developer In-house
Format 360, PS3 (version tested)
Release August 31

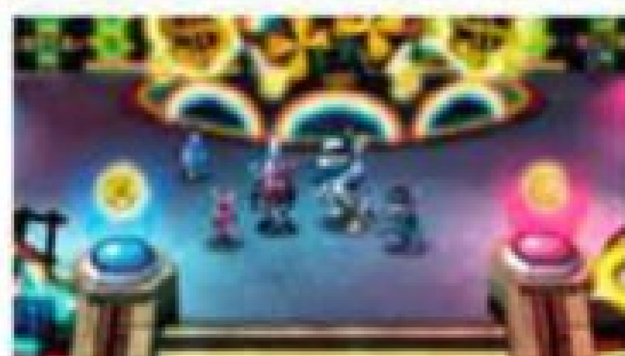
There's very little in this comedy RPG sequel that players won't recognise from lumpen hero DeathSpank's last two outings. This isn't necessarily a criticism: it means that *The Baconing* comfortably retains the puerile but pleasing humour that set apart previous entries from their grim RPG counterparts. Unfortunately, it also means that the distinguishing elements of the series – particularly the combat – are starting to show signs of wear.

The Baconing treads a similar path to the previous games, sending players on irreverent collecting quests and monster hunts. Where the game distinguishes itself, though, is in the world of Spanktopia. Having already mocked common depictions of high fantasy and 20th century warfare, the obvious progression was for *The Baconing* to turn its satirical gaze towards science fiction. However, the canvas of influences is far more imaginative than it could have been: there's a post-apocalypse feel to earlier areas, but it's interrupted by a booming supercomputer that's part Deep Thought, part '70s edutainment program. Hothead has even managed to include a nod to Scorsese in the guise of a Leprechaun-run casino. Progression through the varied setting is certainly more linear than in the first game, but there's a greater effort on the part of the developer to break the monotony of combat by adding distractions like wordplay minigames, outhouse-hopping puzzle sections and even an approximation of '80s colour-punching memory game Simon.

The Baconing largely forgoes any need for players to grind through armies of enemies in order to progress. Despite this, occasionally a difficulty spike will halt progression and even on the easiest setting some enemies will require perseverance and saintly calm to defeat. Combat still has occasional feedback problems but has undoubtedly been improved, if not overhauled. The biggest additions are the ability to charge projectiles – meaning that your crossbow no longer borders on useless – and, more excitingly, the ability to deflect ranged enemy attacks with a shield bash. Both minor changes, then, but for the first time in a *DeathSpank* title it feels like you can survive on skill alone, as opposed to swigging potions and fleeing.

Despite all this, there's a weary cynicism to *The Baconing* – the script is still amusing but the wordy humour has become so familiar that it's in danger of being overlooked; the combat, while improved, is often the least enjoyable part of the game. *The Baconing* is undoubtedly a solid, entertaining addition to the series, but over-saturation has made this once brash and energetic adventure feel slightly predictable.

7



SWIMMING WITH SHARKS
As in the previous games, DeathSpank won't be alone in his thong-burning quest – *The Baconing* features drop-in co-op with the widest selection of sidekicks yet seen. Old timers Sparkles and unicorn-riding ninja Steve return, but you'll also get the disturbing DLC man-spider, Tankko. The newest addition to the team is Bob From Marketing, a hammerhead shark with laser eyes and the ability to heal himself by cannibalising enemies.

Another Hitchhiker's Guide influence is found in The Forest of Tomorrow, which comes with the delicious, edible mascot called Muto, who begs to be killed and eaten. It's blackly comic and just the right side of disturbing



EYE: Divine Cybermancy

Even the name tries to do too much. *EYE: Divine Cybermancy* is aimed so far beyond the capabilities of ten-person development team Streum On Studios that it doesn't think to fix to the fundamentals upon which its highfalutin concept relies.

EYE is an FPS interbred with RPG genes. The game's set in a mad cyberpunk future that's equal parts pragmatic, Warhammer 40,000-esque industrialism and otherworldly surrealist dystopia. There's some delicious weirdness in here – a story unafraid to throw around concepts like "an unending war with the metastreumonic Force" – but it's diluted or dissolved by godawful translation. Your mentor – a seven-foot angel of death in brass – repeatedly tells you things are "fucking awesome!!" It's something of a mood killer.

With the reams of text near-incoherent, it's up to the environments to provide context and backstory. Here, the game's typically idiosyncratic, using the still eminently capable Source engine, and often pulls off cold sci-fi beauty well: one particular highlight washes a broken-down industrial complex in an eerie green glow. But the game's levels are too large, and too reliant on wide, empty rooms and pea-soup fog at long distances. The stages are too sparsely populated to sell the idea of a functioning dystopia, feeling instead like a modder's first drafts.

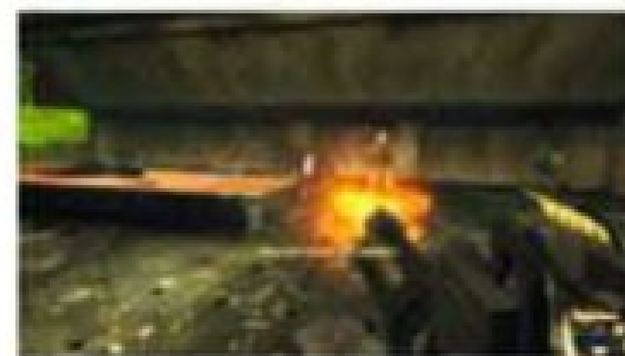
Perhaps the levels' cavernous nature would be less of a problem if the missions didn't force players into constant backtracking. In an attempt to make missions multi-stage, you're forced to fight your way back to your contact, pushing through the waves of enemies conveniently respawned as your back was turned. *EYE* tries to ape *Deus Ex* in its freedom of choice, but Ion Storm's game knew that players were only free when they understood the systems around them – guard patrols, blindspots, escape routes. *EYE* has none of this nuance: enemies psychically know your hiding spot, and stealth is a maddeningly inconsistent option.

Much more sensible is the choice to grab the largest weapon you can carry and lay waste to everything – there's no downside to doing so. Non-lethality is never a combat option, and even three-choice dialogue trees usually end with 'don't kill', 'kill' or 'kill!' as the options. Enemies come in endless waves, the game's monster-ish manifestations of the metastreumonic Force being the most relentless. *EYE*'s more subtle tactics – such as hacking – are overwhelmed in the face of such odds.

Occasionally, the glow of sheer ambition nudges polish-related problems away from the light, allowing a few glorious moments to gaze upon what *EYE* could've been. But un-met ambition isn't enough.

4

Publisher Streum On Studios
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now



HACK SORE
EYE allows fourplayer co-op in any of its missions. Including an extra human or two immediately opens out the combat: by having one person draw fire, another is free to try to wrangle the game's impressively open but fiddly hacking system. Anything can be hacked, and either destroyed, possessed or drained of energy – including you. Fail a hack and there's a chance you'll be counter-hacked, forcing you to re-hack your own brain.

The flimsy video tutorial explains concepts behind health, energy, psi-power, cybernetic implants, inventory management and hacking, but the menu system is too clunky to make their management intuitive



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games

In this issue's People, Places, Things we meet the multitalented Mike Morasky (p132), audio artist, animator, TV director, AI designer, visual effects artist and the man behind the music at Valve. On p134 we take a trip to *Metal Gear Solid*'s Alaskan island setting Shadow Moses to consider why it works so well within a stealth context, and on p136 look at the twisted evolution of health in games. On p138, Studio Profile takes us to Double Fine, the company set up by ex-LucasArts man Tim Schafer, to find out how a team that once made one game in four years has turned into a studio producing four games in one year. The Making Of... *World Of Goo* is on p142, in which we discover how two men turned sticky balls into a monster-sized indie hit. In a new feature on p146, we showcase the artwork of South Korean developer Bluehole Studio in The Art Of... *TERA* and talk to its visual director about how he and his team designed the exiled realm of Arborea, creating one of the MMORPG universe's most aesthetically powerful settings. Rounding out this issue's Create are our regular columnists, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p152) explaining why it's important to be generous, LucasArts' Clint Hocking (p154) kicking off a new series of columns about low-level design by thinking hard about hand grenades, Randy Smith (p156) of indie developer Tiger Style setting out the premise of his new game, and writer James Leach (p158) sitting in an audio recording booth with the likes of Stephen Fry.



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The business section of **Edge**'s Web site



Solid Snake's original PlayStation adventure in 1998's *Metal Gear Solid* took him to the island of Shadow Moses. We retrace his steps on p134

People

MIKE MORASKY

Valve's man of music, an experimental multimedia polymath

Morasky arrived in games via an exceptionally winding path through other media. His broad interests have found fertile ground at Valve



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Download the *Portal 2* soundtrack

Few CVs instil a greater sense of despair in the underachiever than those belonging to Valve Software employees. Yet, even among these famously polymathic people, **Mike Morasky**'s multidisciplinary triumphs stand out from the rest. Award-winning composer, audio artist, animator, director of television, AI designer, movie visual effects artist on titles such as The Matrix and The Lord Of The Rings – he is, even by Valve's high standards, a good catch. And since arriving at the company, which actively leverages its workers' interdisciplinary instincts, he has been plying his skills in just as many areas. Perhaps his most prominent contribution remains the generative music accompanying *Portal 2*, which weaves the bleeps, whirs and electronic trills of the test chambers into a crescendo as the player manipulates elements of the puzzle.

Yet it was not music that first drew Morasky to gaming – but the prospect of exploring interactivity in a broader sense.

"Other than being an avid player and having an interest in chip-level audio mechanisms, writing music specifically for games themselves has never really been my main creative focus," he says. "My earliest interest in games was from the perspective of crossmedia art, and was focused on the conceptual depth that programming interactive experiences allows. I'd had numerous near-misses working in games in the past. In fact, my first animation gig was working on a series of cinematics, and I'd written a few simple games back in the day. Over the years I'd worked in and explored a bunch of relevant mediums and disciplines like animation, direction, computer sciences, programming, AI design and of course composition and audio production."

"Interactive music, or at least giving the listener a role to play, is slowly but surely invading popular culture"

Feeling burnt-out following several years working on large film projects, Morasky was looking for a change, and through some ex-colleagues who had gone to work on Valve's animated film efforts, he learnt about the company's unusual internal structure.

"It quickly became apparent what a unique opportunity working there would present from a creative standpoint," he says. "Although I was originally primarily interested in the animation projects, once I experienced how the game teams functioned, it was obvious Valve would allow me to combine a bunch of my diverse interests under the guise of one creative endeavour with a large group of incredibly talented artists with similarly diverse interests. I guess one of the keys to how I and many of my co-workers fit in at Valve is a broad interest in the arts, technology and how the two are intrinsically intertwined both from the standpoint of the creative process as well as an experiential medium. It's also created teams that can easily collaborate and communicate across disciplines as we can dolly out to speak in generalities or zoom in to focus on specifics. On some levels it shouldn't really matter what medium or discipline you're working in; the process of identifying constraints, goals and optimising your efforts should usually be pretty similar."

Composing for all the various types of interactivity in *Portal 2* was very time consuming, Morasky says. No doubt it would have been considerably more so if composition and implementation had been handled by different developers, but Morasky's technical background means he is willing to get his hands dirty, integrating his quick audio sketches with the game so he can manipulate them as a player might.

"Even if I've worked to a video of the game, rarely does a piece work as I predicted," he says. "So I play with it a lot in-game, identify what is likely to be the best path to improving it, execute those changes and play some more. It's not until the final pieces come together actually feeling right as an element of the overall game that I move on."

Needless to say, writing music so that the final composition lies in the hands of its audience provides rather different challenges to those which face musicians working in other media, as Morasky elaborates: "Instead of making the decision of how a particular musical piece is going to be arranged and juxtaposed against the visual experience, which is generally what composers do, the task becomes identifying what those choices are and finding the most compelling way to give the control of those choices to the player."

Morasky sees the linear restrictions and established vocabulary of film composition as part of its strength – indeed, he says, Valve often needs to find ways to establish constraints on composition, to keep the "conceptual structure manageable". Nonetheless, the challenging dynamism of game music clearly offers an enticing frontier for him. "It seems that we haven't even exhausted what games can be, let alone what role music and sound can play in them," he says. "The amount of time that the audience spends in a single title, especially a multiplayer game, and the sheer number of times a music cue may be heard is unparalleled in any other medium, not to mention the obvious issues of working to non-linear narratives with relatively open sandboxes for the player to explore."

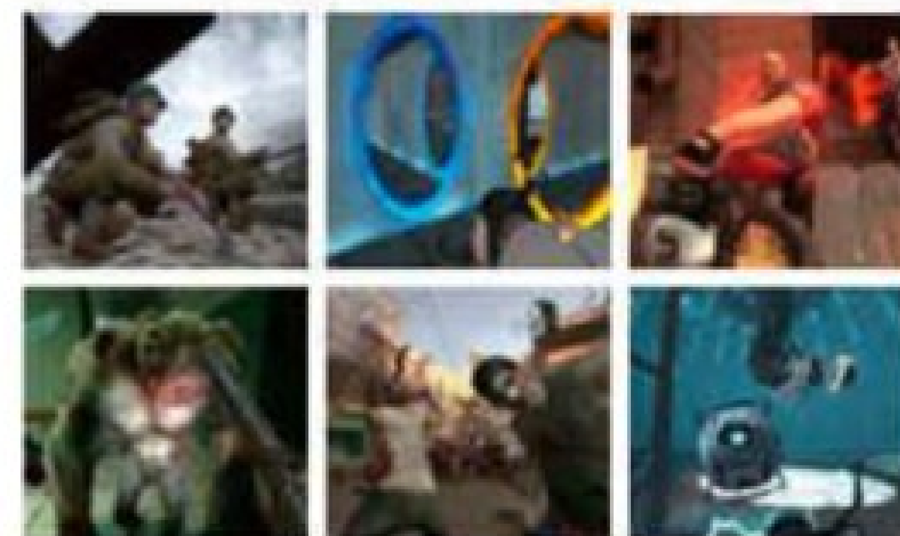
With these ideas of non-linearity and interactivity leaching into other media, it seems that game music has an important role to play in the larger cultural context. "Technology has always played a role in the forward guard of culture, and it seems that the Internet and games are no different," Morasky says. "Clearly, interactive music, or at least giving the listener a role to play in their experiencing of music, is slowly but surely invading popular culture, things like non-linear opera are also making their way into higher institutions, distributing music as an app certainly makes sense as a way to reclaim a lost market, and, of course, the 8bit underground and circuit bending are super fun.

"However, as is often the case with the avant-garde, these types of examples are really just a combination of some forward-thinking technique and a popular form. The true bleeding edge – things like utilising cognitive neuroscience, exploring neuroprosthetics and so on – are most likely taking place in various institutional environments or, interestingly, at a place like Valve where experimentalism is actually part of our development process.

"However, at Valve we're primarily interested in executing experiments with the goal of giving our audience the highest entertainment value we can. So even if we do bust into some uncharted territory, you may just be entertained enough to not even notice." ■

CV

URL www.valvesoftware.com
Softography *Day Of Defeat: Source, Portal, Team Fortress 2, Left 4 Dead, Left 4 Dead 2, Portal 2*



Places

SHADOW MOSES

The Alaskan island that provides the tactics to go with Metal Gear Solid's action



The only way to enter the facility on Shadow Moses is through one of the two air vents on its outer wall, a twin weakness brought about by the island's harsh climate

From *Metal Gear Solid*
Developer Konami
Origin Japan
Release 1998 (PS1)

Cold war. It's *Metal Gear Solid*'s theme. Missile silos, nuclear warheads and statesman-like fingers hovering over red launch buttons while trust between nations ebbs toward disintegration. It's a game about 20th-century dread, the fear of annihilation in an apocalyptic blast; about the notions of your enemies lying hidden under your beds.

It's also *Metal Gear Solid*'s modus operandi. Shadow Moses is a remote Alaskan island so icy that the soldiers stationed there must be injected with peptides to prevent their blood from freezing beneath their white furs. It's home to Alaskan field mice, wolves, ravens, pine trees and little else, flora and fauna grown hardy in the snowy blast of its winds, an ecosystem forced into efficiency as warmth and energy became a premium.

You arrive in this place via icy waters, propelled through a cave to emerge, dripping, on a cargo dock. But it's not until Solid Snake takes the elevator to the helipad (the island is too small for a runway) that it begins to make sense why such a remote locale should provide the ideal focal point for a game based on such broad themes. Bleak, hostile, a swarm of snowflakes in the night reducing visibility, it is just about the perfect place to hide a top-secret nuclear-launching robot from the eyes of the world. But then again, it's just about the perfect place to hide anything.


There may be an over-reliance on crates, but the objects used to create obstacles and texture feel appropriate to the setting

For all its frozen desolation, the uninhabitable rock which props up this dark tale of military scheming is the perfect companion for Solid Snake. Without its hiding places he could not survive. Often game locations assume the role of a character in games, pressing their personalities on to the story, funnelling the mechanics designers have created to fill them in ways that amplify their effectiveness. But rarely does a location become a true companion to the action, without whom our avatars would simply perish.

The uninhabitable rock which props up this dark tale is the perfect companion for Solid Snake

You see, for all the radio codec chatter support Snake receives on his one-man infiltration mission – the reassuring advice from Colonel Campbell, the quotations and truisms from Mei Ling, and the Shadow Moses Island tour guide advice from Master Miller – Snake's main supporter is the island itself. It's in its nooks and crannies that he finds refuge from the unblinking eyes of CCTV cameras and patrolling grunts. The irony is that, tucked behind some remote rock in the freezing gale, there is far greater security than inside any of the warm buildings farther inland.

The perennial night sky becomes a blanket of safety, the craggy walls friends to be clung to. But Shadow Moses is also an indifferent mistress. Leave a trail of footprints on its white-sheet fields and they'll lead danger right to you. Crunch its snow underfoot and the sound will alert eager ears, even in the wail of a gale that simultaneously works to muffle them. Shadow Moses is a companion to be used, but never trusted. In this way it fits well with Solid Snake's circle of friends, whom he always keeps at arm's length, a habit born of hard lessons learned.

Shadow Moses revels in its contradictions. Most obviously, these are man-made: a nuclear-weapons disposal facility that secretly doubles as a weapon development complex. But they are also natural. Formed by the eruption of a volcano on one of the Fox Islands at the eastern end of the Aleutian chain, here is a frozen expanse born of molten heat. And while its extremities may be cold and bitter, the foundry and blast furnace (established to make building materials used to construct the base) ensure it has a warm heart, one visited more than once over the course of the game.

Indeed, as you inch towards the endgame face-off in the launch-room heart of the base, the literal temperature rises along with that of the plot. You feel your way from the cold exterior towards the white-hot core of both the story and island itself. But it's not a journey played out on a linear temperature scale. With key locations (and the core members of Fox Hound who form the boss battle punctuation marks to the game flow) on the island dispersed across separate buildings, Snake must always head back out into the frozen air as he works his way from interlocking hotspot to hotspot.

The walkways connecting the points of drama take various forms. One canyon is home to an M1A1 Abrams tank, whose bulk fills the passage the same way as the cackling laughter of its driver, Vulcan Raven. Another is a literal walkway, linking two communications towers, 28 storeys up over a glacier that's blocking the overland route. Then, of course, there is the snow field, a barren expanse of pure white upon whose innocence Sniper Wolf's blood is spilled as she pleads to be set free. The island's indifference to poetic death speeches is made clear by a top-down camera that watches as snow covers both her body and her memory, even as her final breath is drawn.

In the end, you leave the way you arrived, through a supply-route tunnel that leads out of the complex, and complexities, through which you burrowed. Shadow Moses Island stands, resolute, watching your departure as it awaits its own fate: an aerial nuclear strike arranged to keep the incident out of the public eye. Looking back, it's hard not to feel as conflicted about the place as it appears to be about itself. Shadow Moses is a beautiful protector, under whose wing Snake crawls and finds continual salvation. But it is as cold-hearted as it is clothed, a combination that creates the sort of emotional place from which it is always toughest to move on. ■

Things

HEALTH

Nobody wants to die. But were games more fun when we still could?



Even the first *Halo* had health packs, despite the recharging shield. The packs were dropped for *Halo 2* and *3*, but returned for *ODST* and *Reach*

When videogames were young, our lives were simple: we had three of them, generally speaking, and we lost one whenever we ran into a ghost, or an alien, or a tank. Health didn't come into it back then. We were alive and then we were dead. We thrived, and we fell.

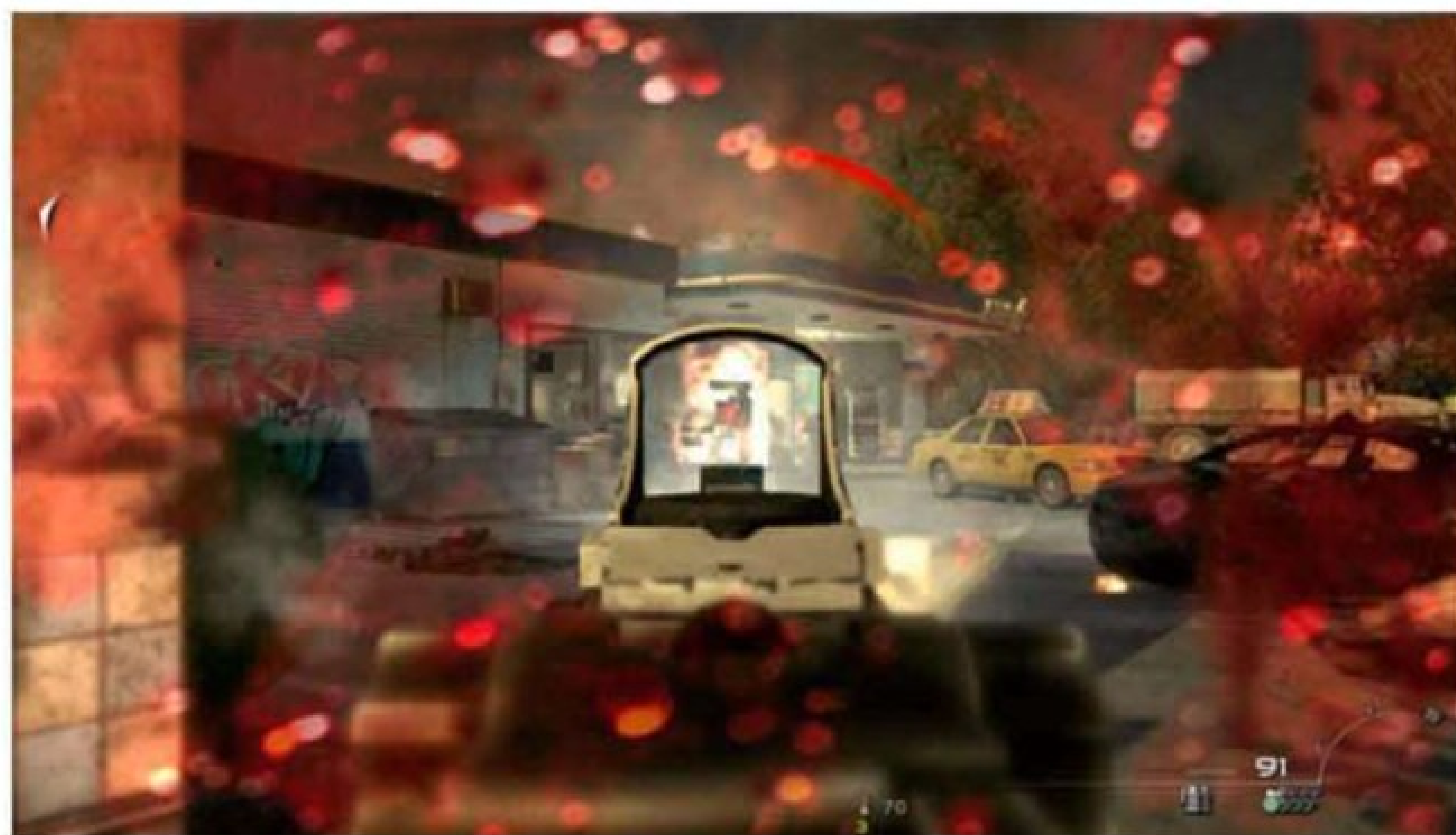
Health came along when games became more ambitious, but did health make games healthier? Suddenly there were meters to measure, medicine to devour. Health allowed us to last longer, but it also made us addicts. Is it better just to live, and then, just as quickly, to die?

Pac-Man didn't need health even though he ate a lot of pills, and early games didn't need it because they were twitchy, binary worlds, modelled on pinball. For a long time, the one-hit death was as much a part of the arcade experience as smart bombs and leaderboards. You were powerful but fragile, like a glass cannon, and the combination sharpened the mind. But this didn't begin life in some forsaken forest, it began in space, amidst the endless vector nebulae of imaginary galaxies – and those first glass cannons were spaceships.

But games wanted to explore more than high scores. They wanted their settings to be more than a backdrop for attack waves. They wanted to take you on journeys, ultimately, and they didn't want to keep stopping off at the morgue. The solution was health, and health meters. When health meters dominate, you get fighting games. When they settle into the background, you get adventures: missions to go on where you're not expected to duck every bullet. The more that games wanted to tell stories, the more ways they had to find to keep you alive to hear each new chapter. Mushrooms, shields, an embarrassing reversion to underwear: health had, in some ways, become the central mechanic.

Health packs were games' way of keeping you in check, of stopping you having all your fun at once

Health began to dictate the pace, too. For a long time, it did this with health packs: an awkward synecdoche that we all agreed to endure. Brewed into red potions, delivered via roast dinner or taking the form of wall-mounted medical stations when the designers had a yen for credibility, health packs were games' way of keeping you in check, of stopping you from having all your fun at once. Working together with its fair-weather ally, the save system – another crucial life preserver that no two games could ever truly agree how to handle – they were responsible for everything from managing tension to tweaking difficulty. From *Mario* to *Resident Evil*, from gold coins to healing herbs, in games you were a wounded superhero racing between pharmacies.



Health meters are perceived to be unrealistic clutter in big action games, but the alternative solutions can't help but be fuzzy

Eventually, though, certain games wanted a little more freedom. They wanted to step away from the addict's lifestyle and experience moments of heroism that came from strength rather than weakness. That, ultimately, is the true legacy of *Halo*: the shield. *Halo* allows you to manage your recovery, balancing your well-being against your patience – and your hunger to be the star of each battle.

Many would iterate on that idea (not least of all Bungie, which never kept that recharging meter quite the same two games in a row) but it eventually became the new standard, as much a part of the modern shooter as the hovering reticule. You fought and then you ducked. Those Victorian doctors were right: you didn't need medicine – fresh air would do.

Occasionally, a game turns up that is darkly obsessed with health, and where your physiology is a central theme as much as a gameplay mechanic. *Metal Gear Solid 3* dropped you into the jungle with a handful of plasters and made you nurse every cracked rib because it wanted you to feel like a survivalist. *Far Cry 2* pinched the jungle setting but tied health, rather poorly, to your morality. Caught in a guerrilla war between two equally obnoxious factions, your stage-managed malaria was a symptom of your ambiguous ethics as much as a gift from the toxic wilderness. Even the jeeps in *Far Cry 2* are sick. Suddenly health had an attitude. Worse, when the game played doctor, it prescribed side-missions.

Can health survive? Look around today and, in certain mainstream games, health is looking decidedly unhealthy, and even death is dying. Nathan Drake dodges bullets like a matinee idol, but when he accidentally takes too many of them, the film catches in the gate and starts to burn. Encouraged by *Halo*'s self-recharging shield, companies like Naughty Dog have allowed their cinematic ambitions to bloat to the point at which they challenge not just mechanics but basic fail-states. Action games – at least the really big-budget ones – become animatronic dioramas with no place for death – no place, at times, for much player agency at all. They're built to be traversed once, at exhilarating speed, and when you expire and restart, you see too many of the gears going around behind the scenes to ever truly enjoy them again. Health meters, meanwhile, have joined the health packs. The health HUD has been replaced with a slow fade to grey, or a Pollockian splatter of jam. Your health has become your vision, and death looks a lot like a restart prompt.

If health does recover, it's likely to thrive out in the more complex genres, among the number-crunching RPGs or the existential indie puzzlers. In the mainstream – the mainstream action game, certainly – it's starting to look like a casualty of story. And story, after all, never wants to relinquish its own fierce grip on life and death. ■

STUDIO PROFILE

Double Fine

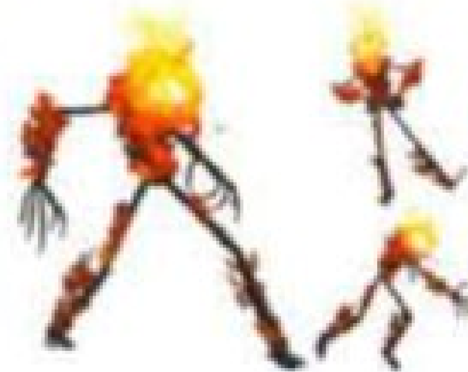
From heavy metal to Sesame Street, the studio that's so much more than just 'what Tim Schafer did next'





1 *Costume Quest*'s heroes gained their superpowers not from stat boosts or skill trees, but by magically transforming into their Halloween costumes. 2 The original design for *Brütal Legend* protagonist Eddie Riggs was heavily based on Motörhead's Lemmy Klimister but eventually retooled to fit Jack Black. 3 Raz, the child-psychic hero of *Psychonauts*, sports trademark bomber jacket, goggles and bell bottoms. 4 Double Fine has worked closely with the Sesame Workshop to ensure that the characters in *Sesame Street: Once Upon A Monster* will be true to the Muppets from the beloved television programme

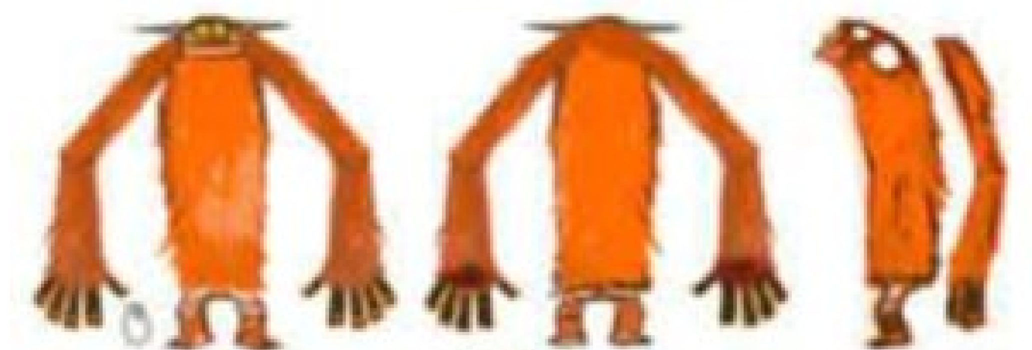













From the A-Team to the X-Men, every effective squad of heroes is made up of specialists who, while strong enough on an individual basis, become unstoppable as a unit. It's a trope common to videogames as well – every good *Battlefield* squad has medics, snipers, engineers and demolition experts, just as any successful *World Of Warcraft* raid requires a rogue and a healer, a tank and a damage-dealing mage.

In much the same way, San Francisco's Double Fine Productions fields a diverse group of small teams, each responsible for a separate game, and each led by an artist of a different discipline.

Animator Tasha Harris created the Halloween RPG *Costume Quest*. Art director **Lee Petty** crafted the matryoshka-doll adventure game *Stacking*. Gameplay designer **Brad Muir** assembled the recently launched tower defence game *Trenched*, while programmer Nathan Martz is putting the finishing touches to Kinect title *Sesame Street: Once Upon a Monster*.

Of course there's one ringleader to bind the lot together: Double Fine founder **Tim Schafer**. We find him in a conference room in Double Fine's offices, which are housed on the second floor of an outwardly boring office building in San Francisco's SoMa district. A unique artistic sensibility weaves through the entire space – floor-to-ceiling reproductions of concept art from previous games *Psychonauts* and *Brütal Legend* border the computer workstations and cubicles, as well as original works by Double Fine artists Peter Chan and Scott Campbell. The room we are in is filled with paraphernalia from Schafer's now-classic *Grim Fandango*.

"We're a weird size," Schafer explains. "We're not the indie guys and we're not the big guys. And we're rarely under the same publisher. What does that tell you?" He laughs. "That we're just hard to work with?"

Double Fine wasn't always a multiple-project operation; Schafer founded the studio in 2000 after leaving LucasArts, where he had developed classic adventure games such as *Full Throttle*, *Grim Fandango* and *Day Of The Tentacle*.

"I left LucasArts," Schafer explains, "because they were working on a sequel to *Full Throttle* and they hadn't talked to me about it. And I thought: 'Gosh, that feels weird.' That someone else could control something that I feel is mine. I wrote it, I created it, I feel like it's mine. But no, George Lucas owns it. And he paid me for it, it's fair! He didn't rip me off, I can't complain… but I *can* start my own company."

Double Fine's first game was *Psychonauts*, a psychedelic and often hilarious adventure-platformer set in an imaginary summer camp for psychics. But although the game retains a passionate fanbase to this day, *Psychonauts* flopped commercially on release. Additionally, publishing woes plagued the project – at the 11th hour, Microsoft backed out of its agreement and the project was barely saved by Majesco.

Publishing woes have become something of an unfortunate Double Fine curse. "You know, it's not about publishers," Schafer says. "I hope I won't get in trouble for saying this, but it's about the people at the publishers. There'll be different people at different publishers with different directives and different priorities, and every once in a while there'll be someone at a publisher whose priorities match Double Fine's, and we want to do a thing together.

"But things don't stay the same at publishers for very long; they usually reorganise, people leave, they change their priorities or what platform they're most into. So we have to move to where the game is. That was our problem with *Psychonauts* – we had a champion at Microsoft and then that person left and the new guy said: 'What's this? What's this project here, why is it late?' Don't be late – that's the other thing I learned."

> "We're not the indie guys and we're not the big guys. And we're rarely under the same publisher"

Shortly after the launch of *Psychonauts*, Schafer landed a pitch at Vivendi to make a heavy-metal fantasy game that would eventually become the action/RTS hybrid *Brütal Legend*.

"The impetus of the game was that I wanted to make an RTS. I wanted to make [classic Mega Drive strategy game] *Herzog Zwei* so much. Originally, *Brütal Legend* was going to be more about hot-red demons, like Glottis from *Grim Fandango*. And I had this other idea for a movie I wanted to do, where you have a heavy-metal roadie who travels back in time.



***Stacking*, featuring characters that act as Russian matryoshka dolls, exemplifies Double Fine's ability to experiment visually**



Founded 2000
Employees 65
Key staff Tim Schafer (founder, president and CEO), Brad Muir (project lead, *Trenched*), Lee Petty (project lead, *Stacking*), Greg Knight (art director, *Sesame Street: Once Upon A Monster*), Tasha Harris (project lead, *Costume Quest*)
URL www.doublefine.com
Selected softography *Psychonauts, Brütal Legend, Costume Quest, Stacking, Trenched*
Current projects *Sesame Street: Once Upon A Monster* and as-yet-unannounced projects

"But you get a bunch of these ideas, like: 'Wouldn't it be cool to have a car in medieval times,' and you have this heavy-metal roadie, and these ideas start to coalesce, and all of a sudden it occurred to me that it could all be one game."

Development got complicated pretty quickly, starting when Vivendi suggested getting some big-name talent into the game. "I always referred to Eddie Riggs as a Jack Black type," says Schafer, "and [Vivendi] said: 'We should get Jack Black!' And I said: 'Are you crazy? That's expensive, and it'll put us behind schedule.' But I'm glad they did, it was the right move. Jack turned out to be awesome and added a lot to the game."

As a game that had been conceived as an RTS gradually transformed into a singleplayer adventure, further notes from the publisher required more changes. "Vivendi also wanted to highlight the singleplayer aspects of the game," says Schafer. "I mostly thought of the singleplayer campaign as being an extension of the tutorial, that the real game would be the stage battles, the RTS battles. So we developed this long campaign, which was kind of a tutorial for that game mechanic, which by that point was pretty complicated. And Vivendi was really worried that people wouldn't get it. And we decided that each mission would teach a new feature.

"But what that meant was that the first mission would have very few features from the ultimate stage-battle mechanic. And when you make a demo of a game, usually it's the first mission. So our public demo had that first mission, which was





Gameplay designer Muir (left) is the man behind *Trenched* (above). "It was cool when we did the first Amnesia Fortnight and Tim said: 'You're going to be in charge of one of these teams – go!' It was flattering, and terrifying," he says. "It's like: 'Oh shit, I don't have any ideas!'"

very early on and as a result had a very limited feature-set. People played that, and they thought that was what the game was going to be."

"I think a lot of people got angry because of the bait-and-switch marketing that went on," says *Brütal Legend* combat designer and *Trenched* lead Muir. "The '*God Of War* with a car' experience that we gave in the beginning – that's enough for a lot of people. Probably most people!"

Schafer adds: "I had the completely wrong anticipation of what the reaction would be. I thought that people would think it was a simple game, and once they got in and saw how deep it is they'd be really happy! They'd think: 'Oh my god, this game is so much more than I thought it was going to be!' And it was the exact opposite, they were like: 'What the fuck is this RTS stuff?'" He laughs again. "I think we could have done a better job of tutorialising how to play [the RTS segments], and integrating that into the game. It was too separate – you'd play these *God Of War* missions and then there was this RTS stuff, and we really wanted to merge them more. If we ever made *Brütal Legend 2* that's what we'd do."

Like *Psychonauts* before it, *Brütal Legend* hit more than its fair share of publisher-related bumps on the way to store shelves. After a merger brought Vivendi under the control of Activision, it looked for a time as though the game was dead in the water. Fortunately, a second 11th-hour rescue came from Electronic Arts, which picked up the rights to the game and published it.

In the midst of the five-year march to *Brütal Legend*'s launch, Schafer realised his team must be flagging. "We spent five years in the world of *Brütal Legend*, and that game has one vision of the world: 'heavy metal is fucking awesome.' And I'm into that, and some of the team was into that, but it must be a drag for some people."

Citing inspiration from film director Wong Kar-Wai, who famously took a break from his production of Ashes Of Time to spend two weeks running about Hong Kong cutting together what would eventually become Chungking Express and Fallen Angels, Schafer directed his team to take a break and take part in a prototyping jamboree called 'Amnesia Fortnight'.

"It was just a way of doing a creative break for the team, not to make games, but I always knew that if we got a great idea for a small game then we could make it. Ever since *Geometry Wars* came out, I thought: 'Wow, there is a way on a console to make a tiny game and have it be cool and have it sell a lot and get to a lot of people.'"

The first Amnesia Fortnight led to the ideas that would become *Trenched* and *Once Upon A Monster*. After *Brütal Legend* shipped, the team did a second Amnesia Fortnight, which gave rise to both *Costume Quest* and *Stacking*.

"Tim really liked *Stacking* after we did Amnesia Fortnight," says the game's director Petty, "and at that point we were still working on [the since cancelled] *Brütal Legend 2*. But Tim wanted to do a small game, so he said: 'Why don't you do [*Stacking*] as a small game?'

"And then, I think it was the Monday we got back from Thanksgiving break, Tim came up and said: 'About that thing you were about to do… do you think you could get ready to pitch it for Wednesday? Because they cancelled *Brütal Legend 2* over the break.'"

"Brütal Legend has one vision of the world: 'heavy metal is awesome.' It must be a drag for some people"

With *Brütal Legend 2* no longer in the cards, Schafer's studio was at a crossroads. "We had nothing else for the team to do," he remembers, "and no money coming in. But we had those prototypes we'd done, and we said: 'Well, let's get the best four signed!'" After a couple of weeks of polishing, the studio took its four best prototypes on what Schafer refers to as a "pitching roadshow." It managed to get all four signed.

"The thing I like about it," says Schafer, "is that we had a catastrophic event and the company saved itself purely based on the creativity of the team. Lee, Tasha, Brad and Nathan – their ideas. The team came together just to make great prototypes to show them off – it wasn't like someone swooped in with a bunch of money, it was just that we could say: "Oh, you don't like that game? What about… these four?"

After righting the ship, Double Fine settled into a segmented, year-round production cycle that, after the release of *Once Upon A Monster* this autumn, will have seen the release of four small downloadable games in the space of a year. "We made the joke," Petty shares, laughing, "that we went from making one game every four years to making four games in one year!"

What's remarkable isn't just that the studio will have released four games in a singe year, but that the four games in question are so different.

"I think that's really amazing about this process," says Muir. "All the project leads have their own personalities and their own focus. And whether it's subconscious or conscious, the places they put their time is obvious. Lee being an art director, *Stacking* is a totally gorgeous game! And Tasha, she's an animator and she loves *Wind Waker*, and you can see that in *Costume Quest*.

"I think *Once Upon A Monster* is a little different, because I think Nathan, being a programmer, was mostly attracted to all the crazy Kinect tech that was put into that game. And I'm just a pure mechanics guy, and *Trenched* is a game about mechanics."

The diversity doesn't just make for interesting games, it also keeps the studio financially secure. Says Schafer: "I found that by doing five-year games – which I don't recommend – you're going to deal with at least three publisher re-orgs, At Vivendi, we had three different regimes while we were working on *Brütal Legend*, and then the merger happened. It was a scramble each time, and we managed it each time.

"So if you get in and get your [smaller] game done in a year, you can probably avoid a re-org. And even if you do have a re-org you probably only have a couple of months left on your project, so they don't drop the axe." ■

Q&A



Tim Schafer
Founder, president and CEO, Double Fine

When not running the show at Double Fine, Schafer is a highly visible presence on the game development scene, hosting the Game Developers Choice Awards at the 2011 Game Developers Conference and even managing to steal the spotlight with a moment of self-aware humour in the middle of Microsoft's depressingly robotic 2011 E3 press conference. But he'll always point you back to the games.

You're a highly visible spokesman for Double Fine. Do you think it's important for the industry to have people who can comfortably occupy the spotlight?

As a back-burner project of mine, I think that humanising the games industry is very important. And having fans, and people who play the game, and having everyone realise that games are made by people. When you read some forums, and people talk about games, they think like I thought when I was a kid: that games are made by companies.

A friend of mine in high school said: "We should make a game!" and I said: "Games aren't made by people like us, they're made by big companies!" As if a company is a Borg, some entity that just craps out a game or something. Well, some of them do… but most games are made by people, people who have an idea, and they execute it and come together and sometimes they all believe in it and maybe it goes the wrong way. But even a bad game, a bunch of people really cared about it, or worked really hard to make it.

Why aren't more games funny?

That's answered on our FAQ page [laughs]. No… I don't know. People ask me that, but I feel like I'm the wrong person to ask. I'm trying to make games that are funny. You should ask someone who doesn't make games that are funny. There are a lot of funny people in the games industry! You should find those people, and ask them why they don't bring that to their games. I think that's where you'd get your answer. And you might find that they say: "Well, no one buys comedy. Look at Tim's games."

The videogame industry is famously obsessed with sci-fi and fantasy – how would you account for the lack of diversity?

Basically, there's a cycle to how games are made. You make games of a certain type that appeal to certain people, and some of them are kids. And then they grow up and they'll make games that they like, which are probably the same ones that appealed to them when they were kids. So that's a cycle of the same ideas turned around generation after generation.

But if you can get anyone in there, like, hire people who aren't usually hired by the games industry, produce games that aren't usually produced by the games industry, it'll appeal to people who aren't usually targeted by the games industry, and then those people will get into making games and it'll get wider, and wider, and wider.





Double Fine's workspace is full to the brim with game concept art, in particular a wall of art each for both *Brütal Legend* (top) and *Psychonauts*



bit.ly/no1b9N
Tim Schafer discusses Amnesia Fortnights

THE MAKING OF...

World Of Goo

How do you turn $30,000 of student debt into a physics puzzle hit? Hang out in cafés, of course



The Beauty Generator (or "giant lady thing") is typical 2D Boy, a playful blend of the two Tims: Burton and Schafer

Publisher 2D Boy
Developer In-house
Format iPhone, Mac, PC, Wii
Origin US
Release 2008

This second, in a coffee shop in San Francisco, someone sits hunched over a laptop. They could be checking their email, or maybe creating a playlist. Or they could be one of an army of lonely home-workers who abandon their desolate apartments each day to seek out free Wi-Fi, triple-shot espresso and the approximation of human company that comes from sitting among strangers.

If you frequented branches of Coffee To The People, Peet's and The Grind in SF in 2006, you might have spotted a particular pair of these free-spirited souls: indie developers **Ron Carmel** and **Kyle Gabler**. They first met at Electronic Arts. Carmel was a programmer with the pogo.com team, but found doing solely tech work soul-destroying. Gabler had more fun – building quick-turnaround game prototypes – but felt restless.

They both dreamed of something more: escape, freedom, a world where nobody served cookies in the company's common area (actually, scratch that, they quite liked the cookies). "Ron and I both had special moments where we looked up into the sky with big wet eyes and thought that something out there is probably better than what we've got now," Gabler jokes. "I think Dorothy and Ariel and every Disney princess have also had very special moments with very special songs about that same feeling we've all had."

Despite barely knowing each other, they decided to take the plunge and go indie. Carmel approached his manager about taking a three-month leave of absence, but was turned down. When he immediately handed in his notice, EA relented and approved the request. It was too late.

"I was offended that I needed to actually quit in order to be treated well," he says, "so I told them I no longer wanted a leave of absence because I didn't want to work there any more. I might not have said it so politely, though. I can't remember."

"Ron is one of the most well-principled people I know and always speaks his mind," Gabler chips in. "It's called 'Ronesty'."

With no development deal in place, scant savings and a good chunk of student loan debt still to pay off, they couldn't afford an office. Instead they holed up in cafes among the other "coffee shop slackers" and prepared the papers needed to launch 2D Boy. It was surprisingly easy. "If you have saliva you can form a company in California," Gabler says. Little did they realise, as they licked envelopes, what good fortune they sealed with that gooey drool.



"It was Ron's warm, wet tongue that slithered all over our [company registration]," Gabler tells us, and provides proof

At the beginning, success seemed as distant as the cloud-shrouded peaks of Mt Kinabalu. It was all the more scary because what little startup capital they had was vanishing with each passing minute. They may have been working for themselves, but they were still on the clock.

"It was very uncomfortable watching my savings drain to nearly zero," remembers Carmel of his trips to the ATM. Subsistence living meant they became used to thinking about money in terms of food, not devkit costs. "Fun finance fact: $12 is about two burritos," Gabler says, laughing. Time – and their bank balances – conspired against them, and inspiration was in short supply.

"We had some rough patches because we're different people and work in vastly different ways"

"I don't think we knew what in the world we were doing when we first started 2D Boy," Gabler confesses. "We just fumbled around with a few ideas." One involved a tree that you could grow and use to eat people. But it went nowhere. It was only when a friend sent them a video of a game being developed in eastern Europe that looked suspiciously similar to Gabler's earlier game *Tower Of Goo* that they discovered their motivation.

"It hurt and felt weird, like getting your bike stolen," Gabler says. "And that really gave us the kick in the pants we needed. It lit a fire in our tummies. Because if someone was going to clone one of my small games, we'd do it better, first!"

Tower Of Goo was part of the Experimental Gameplay Project that Gabler and some friends started in grad school. Each semester, each person would make a game in seven days based around a simple concept like 'evolution', 'gravity', or 'a game your mom would play'. His *Tower Of Goo* game was a weird delight, and it proved two things: first, that playing with anthropomorphic, talking balls of goo was fun; second, that building structures out of those squealing goo balls was even more fun.

The prototype had just one green hill and 100 goo balls. The only goal was to build your ramshackle, sticky structure as high as possible. It wasn't much to hook a full game on. "At first we thought we'd make a string of levels where in level one, you build a tower ten metres high," Gabler deadpans. "In level two you build a tower 20 metres high. In level three, 30 metres high and there might be wind! And we were going to call it *Tower Of Goo 2* or something. But, gosh, I bore myself even talking about that."

Realising they needed a rethink, they decided to set themselves a simple rule: every level must be remarkable and unlike every other level. Working with open source packages – including Simple DirectMedia Layer and Open Dynamics Engine for physics simulation – they got to work expanding the prototype into something bigger.

Background art took a surreal turn, and gameplay altered with each new iteration of the goo balls (among the team's favourites was the yellow Pokey Ball, but because of the way the physics engine was put together they could only ever have one Pokey Ball in any level at any one time). It was a slow, organic evolution. Even with a staff of two, 2D Boy soon found itself coping with its own version of office politics.

"We had some rough patches because we're such different people and work in vastly different ways," Carmel remembers. "Kyle works in spurts. Two weeks might go by in which Kyle's brain grinds and spins and nothing seems to get done, but at the end of those two weeks, he spits out multiple fist-sized diamonds in a matter of a couple of days. I'm more the tortoise than the hare, so it was difficult for me to imagine how Kyle's process was anything other than him simply slacking off."

World Of Goo isn't just a physics-based puzzle game. It's also a surreal satire of (among other things) corporate power. It might even be read as a barbed riposte to 2D Boy's former masters, that 'largE corporAtion'.

Helping the game's goo balls to build gelatinous, teetering structures up to the factory pipes that will suck them into the World of Goo Corporation's factory, you're both their saviour and the unthinking architect of their doom. It's a testament to the game's whacked-out meta-story that what could have been *Bridge Builder* with

snot instead morphs into a Pythonesque comedy of the absurd (with snot).

With their blinking eyes and over-excited shrieks, the goo balls in *World Of Goo* are more than just building blocks. They're characters, too: standard black goo, wall-clinging green goo and the spike-impervious skull goo. Like the suicidal rodents of *Lemmings* or the needy aliens in Toy Story, they're improbably cute.

They're also players in a much bigger story. *World Of Goo*, like so many indie games from *Braid* to *Limbo*, knows that even the small can think big. It's a physics puzzler with epic dreams. The story, written by Gabler, is like one of the goo structures you build in-game. It grows and grows into improbable shapes, speeding us from the opening simplicity of leading goo to suction pipes towards a mind-blowing exposé of the insane truth behind the World of Goo Corporation.

It is not a game that's easy to forget, and it's one that has inspired true devotion in its players (check out, for instance, claymation fan video The Sign Painter at bit.ly/y1nED). "We ended up with weirder and weirder levels, hopefully with memorable set-pieces," Gabler says. "Like poor Fisty the Frog, or a field of windmills, or crawling out of a giant subterranean creature's stomach, out of its oesophagus, and then you rip off its eyes and use them like balloons to float away."

Beyond the invention of the game's levels was its epic narrative. More than just window dressing, it's integral to the designers' first rule that every level must be distinct. "This game totally hijacked our lives, so I suppose it makes sense that our personality quirks and stuff from our lives ended up oozing into the game too," Gabler notes.

"For example, I just think plastic surgery and being really pretty forever is hilarious and tragic, so that's pretty much all of chapter two. By the time we were working on chapter three, we were dead inside, so that chapter is all cold and mechanical, and probably also the most difficult. By chapter four we had lost all perspective on everything, and somehow created what I think is the strongest and most memorable part of the game."

It's true. Chapter four's leftfield turn is as unexpected as it is delightful. It invites you into a green, glowing world of desktop windows (that you can build with) presided over by MOM, the lonely search engine turned spambot harbouring psychotic self-delusions and a nice line in heavily asterisked, end-user agreement small print.

Based in part on Norma Desmond, the ageing silent screen star played by Gloria Swanson in the classic film-noir Sunset Boulevard, MOM is the most bonkers female videogame foil since GLaDOS in the *Portal* franchise. "She came out of nowhere," Gabler admits. "I imagine if she were human, she'd be a massively plump, well-meaning woman with a very large bottom in a china shop. So, what kind of stuff would happen if she were not a human, but a lonely, formerly popular search engine? It just writes itself!" Just for the record, he adds: "She is not meant to represent either of our real-life moms."

For Carmel, these kinds of "unexpected little things" remain the source of the game's amusement. "After playing every level in the game well over a hundred times, the in-between pieces are what still move me," he says, flagging as particular favourites the cutscene with the girl putting beauty cream on her face and the telescope shaking off a wayward goo ball in the final cutscene.

Q&A



Allan Blomquist
Programmer,
2D Boy

Tell us a bit about your background.
I grew up playing games on my NES and got into computer programming so I could make my own versions of *Mega Man* and *Contra*. I met Kyle in grad school where we worked on a virtual-reality *Pong* game together and eventually landed the same internship at EA's Redwood Shores studio in California. I didn't meet Ron until years later, after I had signed on to do a Wii port of some goo thing they were making.

Were you part of 2D Boy's coffee-shop slacker ethos?
My main workspace was a desk in the bedroom of a small studio apartment where I lived at the time outside of San Francisco. My setup was much less mobile than Kyle or Ron's due to all the extra hardware I needed. If I had brought my various industrial-looking black boxes into Starbucks for the afternoon I probably would have gotten us all thrown out.

What were the challenges of the Wii port?
The biggest one was figuring out how to fit all of the game's content into the amount of storage we had to work with as a downloadable Wii game. I had to figure out better ways to take all of the music and textures in the game and shrink them down without sacrificing the quality of the experience. When we delivered the product to Nintendo, the little game was bursting at the seams, but we were all really proud of how much we were able to stuff in there.

With a core creation team of two, it was clear that the game's unique vision wasn't being bland-ified through several dozen development meetings. The World of Goo Corporation reduces everything to uniform gloop but, at heart, those little goo balls want to fly away and be free. There's a lesson in there for us all, probably.

Every indie developer needs a lifeline. For 2D Boy, the defining moment came when the game was announced as a finalist at the 14th Annual Independent Games Festival. For Carmel it was a huge relief: "I knew [then] that we would at least not go broke. Up until that point we only had anecdotal evidence that it was a game people would like. My mom told me the game is great and that it was going to be a hit, but she was not impartial, so I kind of ignored her." They won IGF prizes for Design Innovation and Technical Excellence, which meant both halves of 2D Boy's team could share in the kudos.

In financial terms, a rush of pre-orders and a lucrative deal to make *World Of Goo* into a downloadable WiiWare title was enough to put a smile back on their bank manager's face. **Allan Blomquist**, Gabler's old friend from grad school, was brought in to help out with porting the game from PC to Wii, becoming 2D Boy's third musketeer in the process ("I prefer to think of myself as a third little pig," he says).

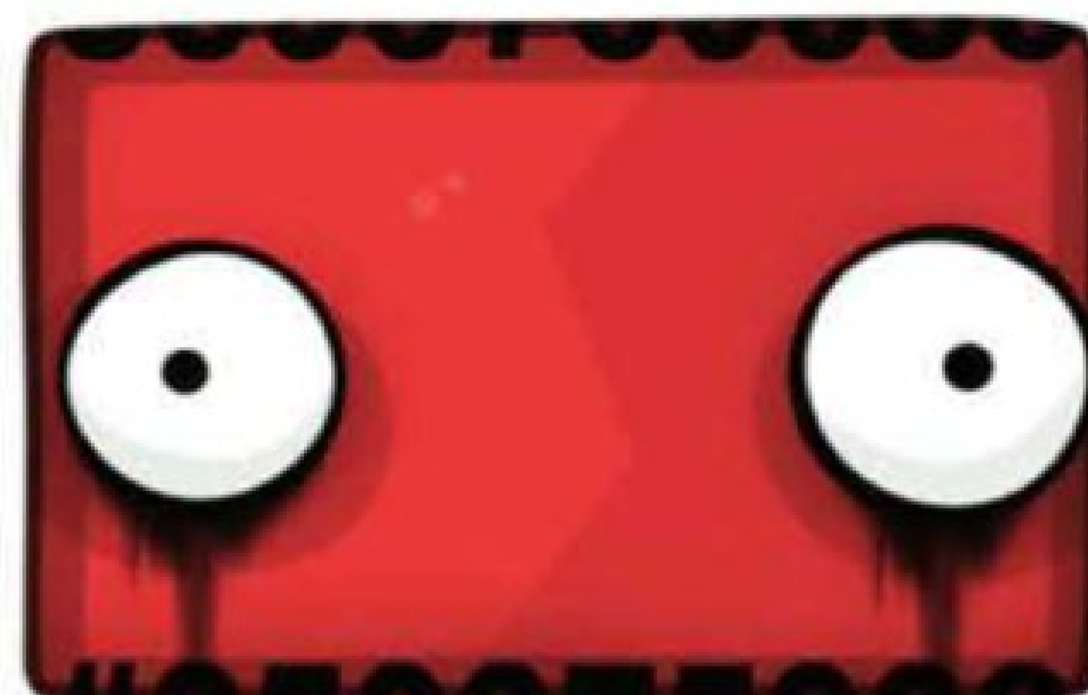
On its release, *World Of Goo* proved as sticky a gaming experience as its gelatinous heroes would suggest. Spreading from PC to Wii, to iPhone to Mac, it also spawned merchandise and won multiple awards. It's an indie game to rank alongside *Super Meat Boy*, *Braid* and *Minecraft* as one of the titles that has helped change the face of contemporary game development.

For Carmel, the good news couldn't come soon enough: "That last year was probably the worst year of my life and I say this having been in the army for a couple of years, which was no cakewalk." Without a studio team to run endless levels of quality assurance testing, bug tracking was a particular nightmare.

"There was no worst moment," the programmer concludes. "That year and a half was one drawn-out worst moment. I had so much riding on this game that it messed with my priorities and my reality in pretty severe ways. After the game shipped it took me six months of doing nothing to recover and feel like myself again. Want to hear something crazy? I'd do it all over again." ■







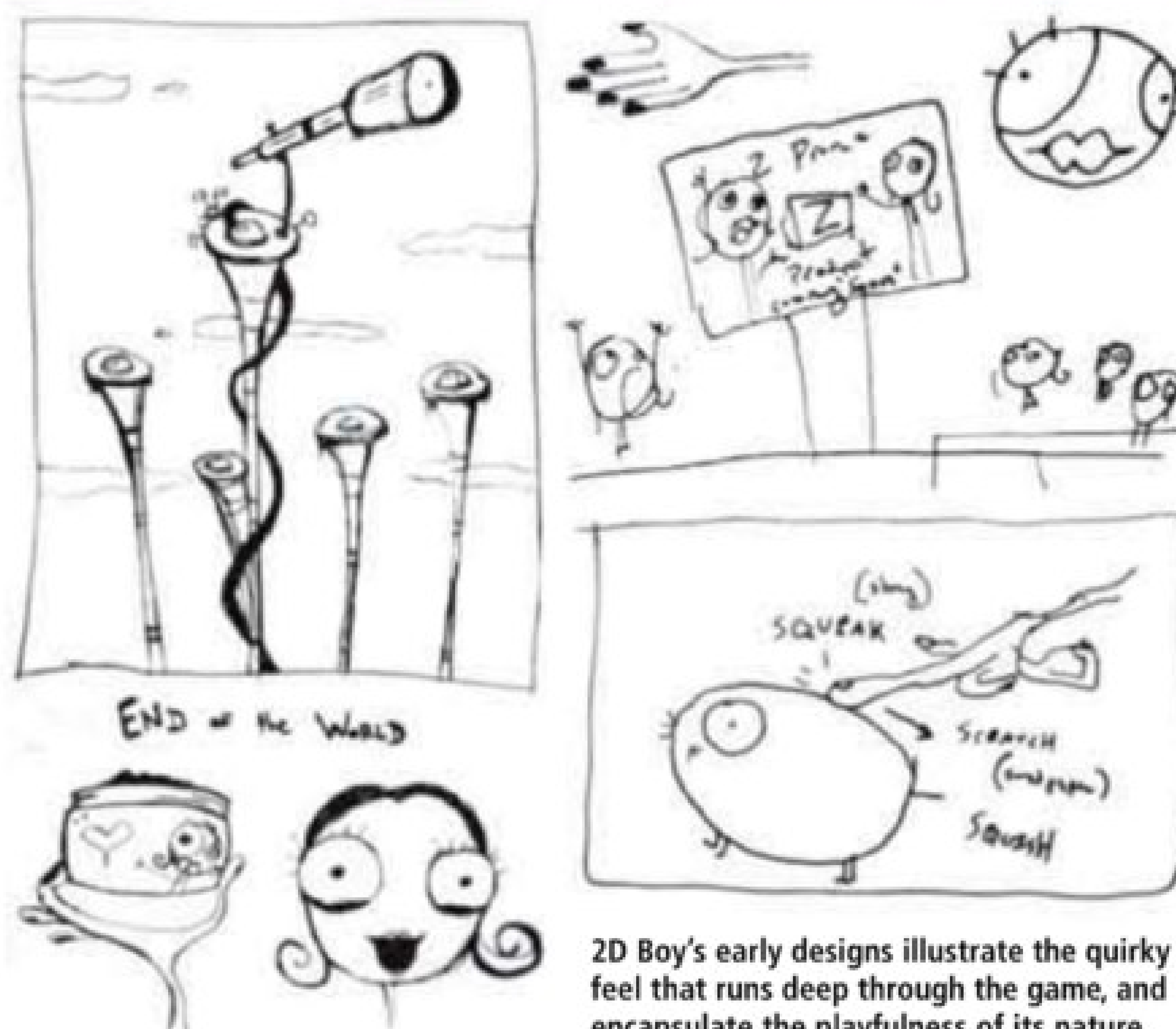
Forget Hooke's law of elasticity, these goo balls are governed by cuteness. Backdrops like Fisty the Frog's bog prove memorable

Indies go inc

It's the danger every indie developer faces: get rich, sell out. While the indie sphere is already being co-opted (see Spike TV's Indie Game Award in association with Mountain Dew), Gabler is fighting back. Together with grad-school chums Blomquist and Kyle Gray (designer of *Henry Hatsworth And The Puzzling Adventure*), he's set up the rather ironically named indie outfit Tomorrow Corporation. "Our first game is called *Little Inferno*," Gabler says, "which is about a company called Tomorrow Corporation that releases a game called *Little Inferno*. It involves fire, chimneys, free hugs and a giant weather balloon that floats over a city where it's been snowing for as long as anyone can remember. We hope to have it ready for this winter. I realise that's the obliquest description ever…" Is he for real? We're not sure. But whatever happens, Tomorrow Corporation is going to give the game industry's more po-faced corporations a run for their money.



Having the designer of quality puzzler *Henry Hatsworth* (above) on board bodes well for Tomorrow Corporation's games



2D Boy's early designs illustrate the quirky feel that runs deep through the game, and encapsulate the playfulness of its nature

CREATE
GALLERY

THE ART OF…
TERA

Showcasing the concepts behind Bluehole's intricate MMORPG



The Island of Dawn greets players when they first set foot in the world of *TERA*. Yet its historical identity remains a bit of a mystery, having recently risen from the depths of the ocean

Q&A

Woo-Seung Lee
Art director,
Bluehole Studio



In early August, MMOG publisher Frogster announced that *TERA* – the action-MMORPG developed by South Korea's Bluehole Studio – will launch in Europe in spring 2012. Previously scheduled for 2011, the game's release has been pushed back to "ensure the game will not only live up to expectations, but surpass them," according to **Daniel Ullrich**, CMO of Frogster Online Gaming. We talk to **Woo-Seung Lee** (above), the game's art director, to find out how his team created one of the most visually stunning MMOGs in the genre's history.

What makes a location distinctly *TERA*?
We created ten various climate and vegetation styles to make the world both an interesting and absorbing world for the player to explore. While all these styles have their own unique characteristics and visual identities, the range and vibrancy of the colours used in each environment is really what sets *TERA* apart from other games. We hope the amount of variation will motivate players to take on new and challenging adventures in every new area, and to really explore every nook and cranny of the environment. *TERA* is a world of experiences, and it's the visual identity that really heightens these experiences by providing players with that 'wow' factor as often as possible. Whether that comes from a breathtaking view from the edge of a cliff or simply seeing a new and strange type of vegetation, we really want players to feel like they're exploring a new world.

How did the history and lore of *TERA* influence the visual direction you decided to take in the game?
TERA's story is essentially based on gods, so you could say that all the visual elements in the game are inspired by god-like imagery. If you look at a character in *TERA*, or an environment, we hope that it conveys a sense of power, history and importance.

Lord Of The Rings-style fantasy is incredibly common in games, especially in MMORPGs. Did you take any measures to ensure that *TERA* feels distinct from other games in the fantasy genre?
We didn't include the various styles just to stand out from other fantasy games; we designed them in order to create an extensive world with various races, which was the development goal of *TERA*. On the one hand there are classical parts which remind you of medieval fantasy, on the other hand there are parts which are designed in a contemporary style, and there are also parts with a science-fiction feel. So *TERA* distinguishes itself from the more general medieval atmosphere and from generic







Val Ellenium (top) is home to only those that can bear its climate. It is an example of *TERA*'s unique landscape design. Northern Shara (below), the third continent players will travel to, starts to up the ante in terms of the size of environments and monsters











Velika is the human capital, serves as one of the game's primary hubs, and is home to the Valkyon Federation

From concept art to a living capital city

"We experienced lots of trial and error when creating the city of Velika, in concept art and production in particular, because from the get-go we knew it would be a large and very important city in the world of *TERA*," Lee tells us. "So we wanted to make it stand out, and everyone in the team had lots of different and exciting ideas for what they wanted the city to look like. For example, I remember someone saying: 'It would be nice if you could see the roofs of the buildings beyond the city!' and everyone had an image like this in their head of what they wanted the city to achieve visually. It was very difficult bringing all these ideas together and making them cohesive, but I think our art team succeeded. The experience we got from creating Velika was invaluable and gave the team lots of confidence. Oh, and in the game, there is a vantage point where you can look over Velika and see all the rooftops!"





Mount Tryannas (right) introduces *TERA*'s dark side. After the lush and sun-soaked first continent, it's a seismic shift in tone





Created by the god Amarun, the Amani (left) are fierce warriors. The High Elves (centre) joined the Valkyon Federation after being devastated by an invasion of allied races. Descended from giants, the Baraka (right) are gently natured but hardly weak in battle

fantasy which we feel would have been a very uninspiring direction to take with the visuals. With the visual identity we chose, I think *TERA* really stands out from the crowd.

How much of designing a world like *TERA* revolves around exaggerating the scope of real-world locations?

Exaggeration is needed to make the deserts 'deserty' enough, or to make snowfields snowy enough. With the kinds of themes we have in *TERA*, it would have been a mistake to ground our visual identity in the scope of reality. The best example for this is Alemantheia, the city of the High Elves. This ordered and beautiful city in the desert is designed to be a very clean and structured city. By placing it in the middle of a very arid and harsh environment we were able to create a beautiful visual contrast and intensify the characteristics of both landscapes.

What kind of location-based research did you do during *TERA* pre-production?

I took a one-man country tour of Germany! To create medieval buildings, nothing is better than experiencing them first-hand and getting a feel for the visual nuances you simply can't see when looking at a photo. On the tour I preferred to travel through the country rather than cities, and studied various building types. In the cities you have some incredible architecture, but it's the countryside that holds all the interesting, untouched history that I feel has a greater visual personality. Of course we didn't simply copy the buildings exactly in our game, but the impressions and materials from that tour were a huge help in creating extensive and beautiful cities and the accompanying background landscape.

Games made using Unreal Engine often have dark tones, with lots of brown and grey. How did you approach the issue of colour?

One of the strengths of the Unreal Engine 3 is its ability to do shader customisation. The world of *TERA* is, in many respects, very bright compared to other Unreal Engine 3 games, which tend to be darker. However, in the world of *TERA* there are also dark and dim places. There are dozens of zones in the world of *TERA* and they each provide a distinct colour and hue. So through research on customisation within the technical art team in Bluehole Studio, from very early on we had the goal to differentiate ourselves from the market. ■

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

The importance of being generous

So, assuming you either make games or want to, what's your model for how to do that? Pull a team together, make a game and pop it up on Steam? Upload it to an app store? Make a demo and sell a full-priced version? Hope to hit the wave and strike it lucky?

You're probably making a huge, but fairly common, error: you think you're in the business of making stuff.

A novelist writes a book, sells it and earns money from those sales. A musician does likewise with an album, and a game developer with his game. They seem to be making stuff and selling it, so the business of entertainment seems like any other product business. It's all about charging a price for an object that the market will bear, and advertising to sell more of that product. Right?

Well, no, not really.

A game (or any artwork) has two parts. The first is the package, meaning the box, discs, manual, shipping and handling, advertising, promotion and so on that the publisher provides. The package is tangible. You charge money for the package and the audience pays.

But the package is not why customers buy, nor what they are buying into. All game discs are the same and come in similar boxes, yet despite their physical similarity they wildly differ in price. *Call Of Duty* can get away with charging £50 where some games are only £10.

The package is just a means of access to the second part: your game world. It's a ticket. Your game world is intangible and yet is the entire point of the package. It is priceless. Or to put it another way, your game world has no intrinsic value. And that's where things get depressing.

The product mentality leads developers to believe that their work has an intrinsic value, which in turn leads them to want to protect it. It sometimes seems as though the whole world selfishly wants their work for free, and so the age of the professional developer is over if they don't fight fire with fire.

That's why they lobby for legal solutions and other measures to put the toothpaste back in the tube. It's why they worry about piracy, and why at conferences the mood is often one of survivalism, gallows humour or impending doom.



The future is about using digital distribution to give, give and give some more in order to build trust

When you realise that not only do we live in an age when the package is less necessary than ever before, but also there are many more developers just like you all doing the same thing, everything starts to feel like a race to the bottom. If you and your small team can upload a game to the App Store, then so can anyone.

Faced with this, many a developer tries to restrict or dole out their world as sparingly as possible to make each one seem artificially valuable, such as a demo version with one level and an option to buy the full-priced version, a subscription model or high-priced copy protection.

It used to, but increasingly doesn't, work.

In the digital age all packaging tends toward a zero price, and that changes the rules. The rule in the 21st century is this: the more you give, the more you get.

Making games (or any artform) is not a making-stuff industry. It's a relationship industry. Players want to be fans, to enjoy your game world and to support it, but to capture them you have to make the bold gestures that lead them to trust you above all the rest of your competition.

Think of it like dating: who has more chance of building something that lasts, the guy who wants to get laid on the first date or the guy who puts the time in with chocolates, dinner and flowers? Who is going to benefit more? Finding fans is like that.

The more miserly your behaviour, the less likely any player is to become a fan. The business of relationship building is a long-term strategy of finding your thousand true fans and then working with them to build a million more. It's not about one game or another; it's about a lifelong relationship where game after game draws more and more of them into your orbit.

To do that, you have to be generous above and beyond the norm. That might mean giving huge amounts of levels or content away, as Rovio does with *Angry Birds*. It might involve enabling endless online play, as Blizzard does with Battle. Net. Alternatively, giving away a whole third of your game as a freely available demo, as id did with *Doom*. Or engaging with your community passionately and giving them tools to express themselves, as Bungie does with *Halo*.

The exact form of the gift varies, but the common theme is the large gesture, like a big box of chocolates or a dozen red roses. With no packaging to worry about, the future is about using digital distribution to give, give and give some more in order to build trust.

Generosity is not a single act, a daily deal or a price drop that you initiate to drive sales; it's a constant activity that tells players that you are making something special for them, and that you care. Do that and they will be much more willing to spend over the odds for your latest game in the long term. Keep giving, and they respond.

Rovio has figured it out. Why haven't you?

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him online at whatgamesare.com



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In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

The inner workings of the hand grenade

If you've ever fragged or been fragged by a frag then you're probably familiar with the immediate and simple pleasures of the hand grenade. Very few of us, however, have spent time deeply considering the design of grenade mechanics and how different decisions creep their way up into the aesthetics of play. Their sheer and sudden power means they can reinforce or undermine a design. It is therefore crucial to understand the basic parameters of grenade design and the impact different design decisions relating to grenades can have on your game.

As with any design problem, the first thing to consider in grenade design is the aesthetic experience you hope to encourage. Do you want the frenetic adrenaline rush of run-and-gun play, driven by reflex and reaction? Or do you want a more deliberate, player-determined pacing that values positional play and more carefully considered tactical movement? If you are making *Bulletstorm*, it's probably the former, while *Rainbow Six* may suggest the latter. Once you have a set of cohesive aesthetic goals, you can begin thinking about various mechanics and the dynamics they will likely promote.

An important first question is whether grenades will be a weapon you need to equip, or whether they will be assigned their own button. The need to equip grenades massively restricts their use, all but preventing them from being used in response to a sudden change of fortune. Play becomes highly consequential if the player has no quick way to reset the flow of an engagement.

Another critical question relates to the physical simulation and how effectively the player can predict trajectory, landing point and detonation point. Because grenades fly in an arc, HUD reticules can be inaccurate, and in-world reticules or trajectory indicators can feel clunky, forcing the player to make finicky manipulations. Conversely, without these indicators, players need time to internalise arcs and ranging for throws at different angles, and every throw is a 'best guess'. You might need to consider designing and coding helpers that improve those guesses – especially as relates to ground friction. If a grenade lands short of an obvious cluster of targets, let it bounce and roll a bit farther. If it lands on target, stop it dead.



Players tend to hoard rare resources; as the scarcity increases, the tendency to use the resource falls off

The more confidence the player has that he can use grenades effectively, the more likely he will be to keep using them, the better he will get, and the less you will need to rely on helpers. As with any such helpers, though, test them rigorously and disable them in competitive multiplayer modes.

Another thing to consider is whether you want grenades to be a weapon for killing, or a weapon for flushing enemies from cover. Making grenades that stick to, or explode on impact with, living targets makes for lethal direct attacks. If making these choices, you might also want to keep the radius small, and make AI less responsive to nearby grenades so that grenades typically only take out one enemy at a time, and don't disrupt others. On the other hand, if you want grenades to be a tool that allows the player to reset the flow of a poorly trending combat, then larger radius, lower damage grenades that compel the AI to escape are a great tool.

How many grenades the player can carry at a time, and how frequently they are found in the world, are factors that determine how often they will be used, and affect all of the above considerations. Keep in mind that players tend to hoard rare resources; as the scarcity of a resource increases linearly, the tendency of the player to use the resource falls off exponentially. If you have obvious bosses, then powerful, rare grenades are probably smart. If you have lots of waves of fodder then weaker, ubiquitous grenades will likely better support your design.

Damage fall-off curves are intimately tied to your level design and can only be determined by endless tweaking in real game environments (not just test gyms!). Having long fall-off curves, and thus larger radii, can be computationally expensive, especially if you need to occlude damage in tight or cluttered environments. In general, low to moderate radii with higher damages will give you more freedom to tune, and are better for interior games, while larger radii with moderate damage blasts work better for exterior games, while also tending to work better with an AI that may have more freedom to move.

Whether or not to give players the ability to 'cook' grenades by holding on to them to deplete the timer before throwing is an important consideration for multiplayer. With practice, experienced players can become very skilled at cooking grenades to have them explode right next to their targets, leaving new players at a serious disadvantage and adding a barrier to entry. At the same time, the option to cook affords more highly intentional play.

These are just a handful of the dozens of factors that need to be considered in the design and implementation of grenades, but hopefully they will be a starting point for those setting out to design grenade mechanics for the first time, or for players with an interest in why superficially similar games can feel so different.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com


CRYTEK

The Possibility Space



RANDY SMITH

Boiling it down, stepping it up

Liang Qi, biologist, mineralogist, expert cave diver and celebrated spokesperson of the Global Space Initiative, twisted his torso and wriggled downward through the tiny opening. Grabbing the rope, he slid the final metres to the floor below, the impact producing hazy spheres of microscopic particulate matter. His headlamp scanned the tunnel ahead. Yet another lava tube, immense, the curved walls meeting overhead and submerging into blackness. He contemplated the timeless span these caves had lain, anonymous and still, since that moment billions of years ago when lava from the Tharsis Uplift had flowed over the surface, leaving them in its wake. The tunnel was stark and cold, but not as hostile as the surface, where the atmospheric pressure and temperature never rose above the triple point of water. Here, at least, liquid water could be found. He had seen it laying in deep pockets and had seen a thin layer of pallid scum, actual extraterrestrial life, around its perimeter. He dared not touch it or even get close without the sampling equipment, and that had been lost in the cave-in. This lava tube, like a dozen before it, was his last hope for reaching safety.

So he walked, and shadows slid behind columns reminiscent of melted wax, and his mind instantly rejected a thing it had seen: a flash of colour in the slotted light, a shape expanding. He froze. His scientific training protested as he crept forward, but the complaint was lost in the din of his human curiosity, so powerfully provoked. He rounded the corner and there was the thing, tangible and real, growing, it seemed, out of the ground. A plant? An animal? Better not to rely on Earth paradigms of life: that's what this was, a true alien lifeform. It stirred and uncurled, seeming to stretch, no… it was growing. It was reaching toward him, or rather, he confirmed with some experimentation, his headlamp. Why would a lifeform that had evolved deep underground on a dim planet be so responsive to light?

That's what I had in mind, anyway, when Tiger Style first decided to make a sci-fi game about discovering life in a cave on Mars. I was drawn to the science of real-life space exploration, imagining moments that could happen decades in our future. What might they be like? Rather than alien fangs and laser pistols, I was moved by the serious and credible. But does pond scum make for good gaming? Our first prototype suggested not, it wasn't working. Too slow, too cerebral.



Does pond scum make for good gaming? Our first prototype suggested not. Too slow, too cerebral

That may seem obvious, but I believe a game with this deliberate pacing could succeed. It might require more patience and imagination, but those are qualities I respect. Maybe someday, but today it's not the cultural precedent, and our prototype wasn't proving the potential. An expansive console production with detailed 3D environments and amazing lighting technology maybe could. It's harder to feel immersed on an iPhone screen.

More importantly, that's a hard story to work with, because much of it is internal to the character, realisations and contemplation, perfect for literature but not games. The contrast between the innocuousness of the pond scum and its potential fearsome killing ability is interesting because we can see into the character's mind, but how might you adapt that? Our prototype had a cool headlamp lighting model, platformer movement and exploration, but by contemporary standards there wasn't much to find. You might discover an interesting alien plant, but the ten seconds it took to grow seemed unrealistically fast on one hand and tediously slow on the other.

What I've learned in this process is that an important measurement of how engaging a game will be is something I call its interaction density. Sid Meier describes games as a series of interesting choices, and you can expand out of his turn-based worldview to include the rapid impulses and responses of action games. Interaction density is how frequently these happen, especially ones that really matter. You might travel down a lava tube for two minutes, but if you only touched the screen once, that's low density. Farther in, the player might decide to grow a plant by scaling a cliff, gathering water, climbing down, shining the lamp on the plant, throwing the water, missing, and starting again. This requires time and attention, but there are few points where it might become varied or dynamic. One decision, minutes of rote execution. Low interaction density.

I think most designers have instincts for this, and the obvious answer is to crank the knob. Because my predilection is for inventing new types of gameplay, I'm wary that this approach might be dogmatic. So interaction density still isn't the design lens I put first, but I now respect it as an important one for consideration. I only really formalised the concept as our game improved: plants grew quickly, they didn't require your light, they spat seeds into the world automatically. It was essentially the same interactions, just made iconic rather than realistic, happening at a pace much closer to how quickly you could choose them. The loss of strict scientific credibility required a shift in tone to a more abstract and game-y game, but much of the vision is still conveyed, and our respect for the material still evident.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose first game, Spider, is available now for iPhone and iPod Touch

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Tales from the sound recording booth

The printer stops churning and there it is. Ninety pages of small spreadsheet cells, each with a sentence or two inside. This is the script of the game you've just written. The plot, the characters, the dialogue, the ill-advised references to other games and TV shows, the typos you really should have spotted. It's all here. And now it's time to go to the recording studio and get it in the can.

Dev teams love it when proper dialogue is put into their game. It adds a whole new dimension. It comes alive. The public never get this revelation because they never play bug-ridden, half-finished games with poor dialogue or no dialogue at all. Not only does it instantly improve the game, but it makes the final submission seem closer. Possibly even attainable. And of course, if you work for Peter Moly… er, any company with a reputation for 'adjusting' games up to and beyond deadline, recording the text casts it in stone. Or in a stone-looking but still fairly unstable fluid, at least.

Anyway, the voice recording bit should be fun. It and mo-cap are the most showbizzy elements of creating a game. The writer must surely love hearing his words brought to life by, say, Steven Segal or an actor. Well, it doesn't always happen that way. Here's how it usually goes.

Firstly, as the writer, you've got a very good idea of how the characters sound. After viewing the concept art, playing the game and being hugely au fait with the story, you should do. So your ideas of voice actors carry a great deal of weight, obviously. Or not. Someone senior on the team loves Eddie Izzard. So your barrel-chested, gruff, monosyllabic hero is now going to be voiced by a verbally rambling cross-dresser. Oh, and note that it's 'someone senior loves Eddie Izzard' not 'someone senior believes Eddie Izzard is perfect for the role'. There is a difference.

So that's the main actor sorted. What about the other 50 talking characters? Where are you going to find 50 unemployed actors? Oh, yes. London. But the producer points out that if you got five actors, and they do ten voices each, it'd be less of a logistical nightmare and far cheaper.

The first day of recording. It's an early start but that's OK because you haven't slept. No, you've been adding lines, rewriting stuff and trying to



Voice recording should be fun. The writer must love hearing his words brought to life by Steven Segal or an actor

shoehorn in things the team have seen fit to wait until the very last minute to ask for. Oh, and apparently now there's a small boy in the game. One of them will be able to cover that voice, surely? Sean Pertwee or someone?

At the recording studio, the first actor arrives. After the obligatory 'hilarious' acting anecdote, you tell him about his character, The Mage. "The what? The image? I don't understand," the actor says. So you tell him he has to be a wizard just like Gandalf. "Oh, no no no. I couldn't possibly sound like Gandalf. The thing is, I played Gandalf in those films. I'm not supposed to replicate the voice anywhere else." So you settle for Sir Ian doing The Mage as a timid, stuttering Brummie. Still, at least his name will be in the credits.

In trots one of the two obligatory females. She's gorgeous but, like all actresses, irredeemably insane. Her performance is moving, harrowing, joyous, perfect. She physically acts the parts, moving and gesticulating. She inhabits the characters fully and makes them live. It is literally amazing. "Sorry, love," says the sound engineer (who'll always be called Chris or, if he's over 50, Jeff). "We'll have to do the lot again. And this time don't wobble around. The mic's picking it up."

Next up is that bloke who's always on the telly. Does loads of radio as well. Adverts and everything. Oh, what's his name? He was in Doctor Who and Holby City. You'd know him if you saw or heard him. This ubiquitous man with no name turns out to be amazing. Not only does he play games, but he's even, dammit, done some research on the Internet about your title. This man nails every voice, every nuance, and improves every sentence. He's polite, funny, takes direction well and finishes early because he's made no mistakes. What's his name? Erm, can't remember.

More people come and go. You resort to differentiating between the goblin attack squads via regional accents. So the archers end up being Yorkshiremen, the swordsmen are from Glasgow and the catapulters all sound like Justin Lee Collins.

And you're done. Apart from the emails that the studio received from the dev team containing extra lines to record. You happily delete these, knowing that Stephen Fry is not going to alter his entire month's schedule to pop back in.

A few days later the work is chopped up and edited and in the game. The best lines, jokes and memorable bits are new to everyone's ears and flash around the dev studio like catchphrases. The game seems that much closer to completion. The audio bods tweak and add effects. Perhaps everything's a little too loud at the moment. Up comes a tester: "Why are they all shouting? I thought you'd hired professionals. These people are like preschoolers bellowing out a nativity play." Soon after the volume level has been reduced the same tester says: "It's better since you re-recorded everyone. Second time around, the performances always improve." Sigh.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online

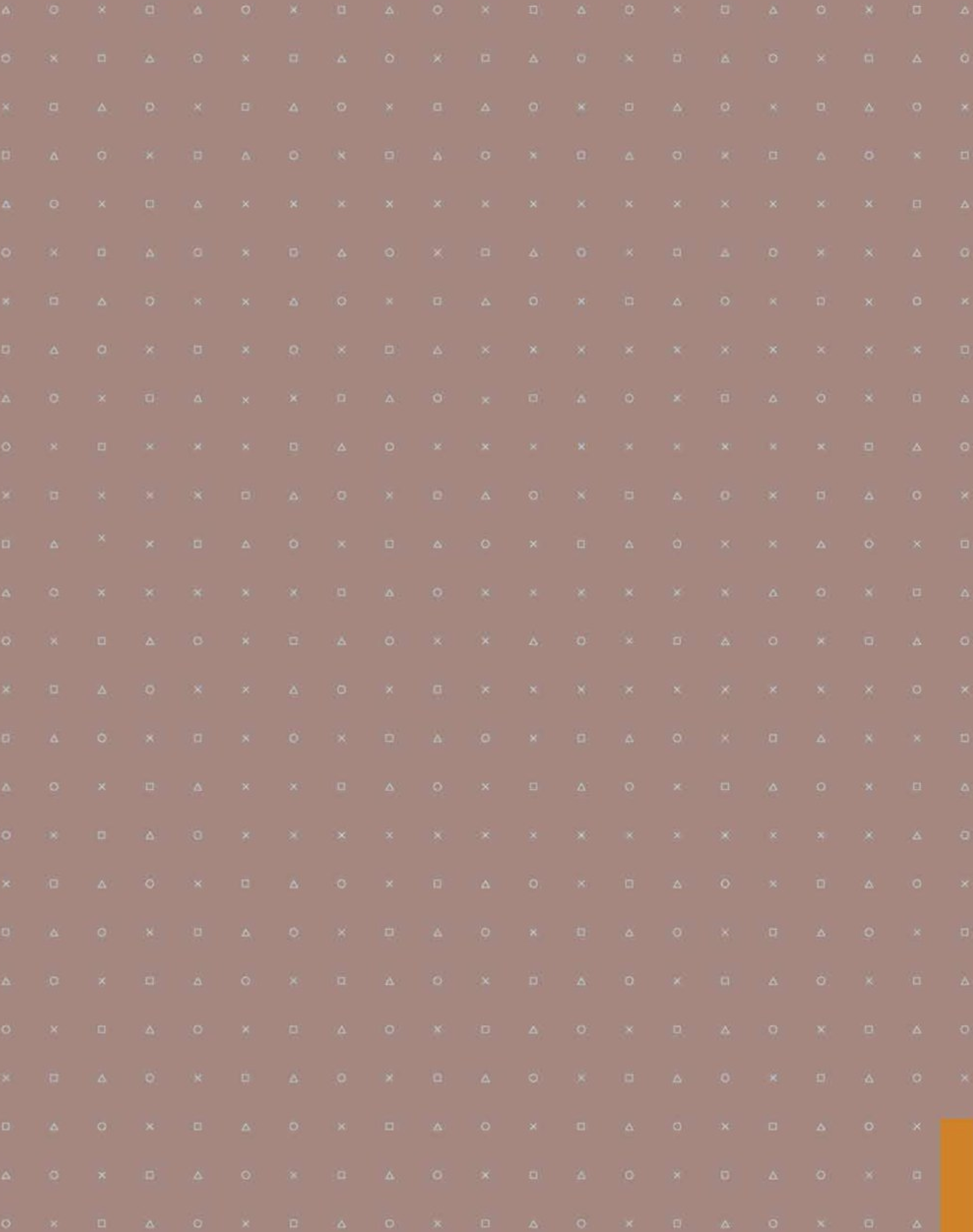



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